BY AIR EXPRESS TO VENUS

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Roy Rockwood

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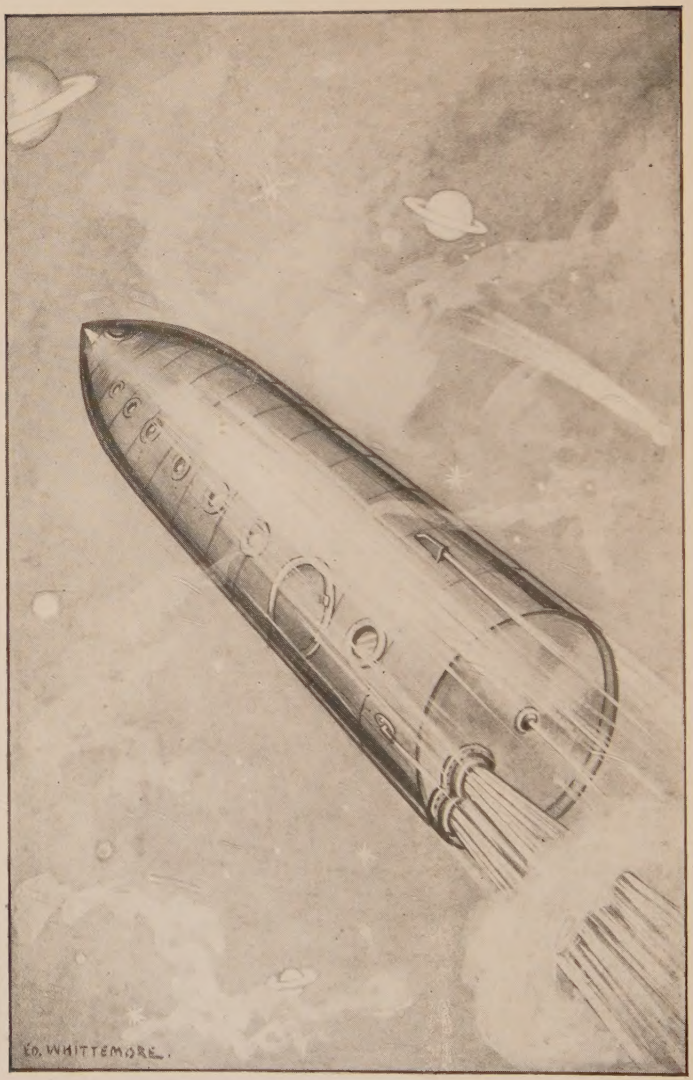

FLYING THROUGH SPACE AT A TERRIFIC SPEED.

"By Air Express to Venus." Page 95

BY AIR EXPRESS TO VENUS

Or

Captives of a Strange People

BY

ROY ROCKWOOD

AUTHOR OF "THROUGH THE AIR TO THE NORTH POLE," "THROUGH SPACE TO MARS," "THE CITY BEYOND THE CLOUDS," "THE DAVE DASHAWAY SERIES," "THE SPEEDWELL BOYS SERIES," ETC.

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BY AIR EXPRESS TO VENUS

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BY AIR EXPRESS TO VENUS

CHAPTER I

STRANGE HAPPENINGS

"THIS is the strangest thing yet!"

Mark Sampson's feet came down from the sofa with a bang and he looked excitedly at his chum.

"What's worrying you now?" demanded Jack Darrow. "Found out something new about the North Pole or located another city in the clouds?"

"Here's an account of a strange meteor, or comet, or airship, flashing through the sky," went on Mark, tapping the newspaper he had been reading. "It's been seen in San Francisco, then in Los Angeles, then in Jacksonville, Florida, then in Chicago, in Detroit, and now in New York City."

"Meteor, comet, airship," murmured Jack. "There's a big difference between the three. It seems to me——"

"The whole thing looks like a blue streak to

most people," continued his chum. "And—wait." He read on. "Gee, after it was reported in New York it was seen in Vicksburg, then over the Rocky Mountains, and in Seattle and in San Francisco again."

"Must be some sort of airship. Comets and meteors don't fly around like that."

"They might if they got too close to the earth. But listen! The thing was seen in New York and then back over the Golden Gate just ten hours later. No airship I know of can make three thousand miles in ten hours."

"We made better than that going to the City Beyond the Clouds."

"Oh, well, that was different. I was talking about the ordinary airplanes. Two hundred and fifty miles an hour is about their limit."

"What did you say about a blue streak?"

"That is what it looks like to most observers—a long, straight, blue streak."

"Perhaps the whole thing is a fake—or some big advertising dodge."

"No, the streak seems to be too far off at times for that. No ordinary airship could go up that far. Say, maybe it's something new—something better than we ever got up—something that can sail everywhere and go like a blue streak."

"Certainly interesting, Mark. Let me see the paper, or read it to me."

"I'll read all it says, Jack. I want to get this fixed in my mind. Looks to me as if it meant something of importance."

"Maybe it's some sort of aircraft from the City Beyond the Clouds—sent to get square with us."

"Or from the moon or from Mars. We left a lot of enemies behind in some of those places," went on the young inventor and explorer.

With Jack as an eager listener, Mark read from the paper a summary of the accounts of the strange, flashing, blue streak which had been seen darting high over San Francisco one night, over New York the next, and then back over the Golden Gate.

"No meteor or comet ever cuts up like that," resumed Mark. "Those bodies come within sight of the earth, keep along a certain path, and vanish."

"In other words they don't play ring-around-a-rosy!" chuckled Jack.

"It pleases you to be funny!" said Mark, in rather chilly tones.

"No, I'm serious!" declared his chum. "And, to prove it, I'll go up to the observatory with you and have a peep through the telescope. Now, how's that?"

"It's time you showed real interest," commented Mark. "Come on!"

The two went out into the hall that led to a staircase by which they could ascend to the roof where they had mounted a very powerful telescope, of the reflector achromatic type, by which, not long since, they had made a remarkable discovery.

As the two young inventors went up to the "sky parlor," as Jack called the observatory, a voice called to them, asking:

"Where are you going?"

"Just up on the roof, Professor," Mark replied. "We're going to see if we can get a look at that queer, blue meteor, or whatever it is, that's been reported as flashing around the sky."

"Oh, yes, I read about that," said Professor Amos Henderson, the patron and co-worker of the young men. The light shone with a halolike effect on his white hair as he came out of his room adjoining the living apartment. "I've been looking for it myself, off and on," added the scientist, "but I haven't had any luck."

"Come on take a look now," suggested Jack.

"No, thank you. There's a good program on my radio," said the old man, continuing, with a chuckle: "I'm getting too old to care much about new meteors or comets. I like a quiet life."

"I guess he'd have said that if he had been with us when we fought those giant grasshoppers and the red dwarfs in that queer City Beyond the

Clouds," chuckled Jack, as he followed his chum toward the observatory stairway.

"That's right," agreed Mark. Then he added: "If we see anything of that flaming blue fire, Professor, we'll call you."

"Yes, do," was the answer. "I'll take a look, anyhow. But I am more inclined to listen to my radio," and, with a wave of his hand to the young men, the professor went back into his room.

"Well, here we are!" exclaimed Jack as they went into the room where the great telescope was housed. The lower end was carefully covered with waterproof cloth and the upper end was close to the opening in the roof. "Start the game, buddy!" he said to his chum. "I'll get the wrappings off and adjust the eye piece while you take the roof off."

"All right," assented Mark, and he started the motor which operated the mechanism that rolled back the roof of the observatory, thus enabling the telescope to sweep the heavens above. Meanwhile, Jack removed the protective cloth and began adjusting the eye piece of the instrument.

The night was a beautifully clear one, and as the workshop of the young inventors was at a distance from any large city, the smoke and haze were eliminated. They were on a small hill which gave them a fine view of the night sky.

"Lot of stars out to-night," observed Mark as the roof rolled back.

"We'll get a good view," agreed Jack, still adjusting the eye piece. "But whether we see that blue comet of yours is another question."

For the next few minutes the two observers were busy taking turns in gazing at the sky through their powerful instrument. It was aimed at various parts of the heavens, and brought into view, with startling clearness, various stars and planets.

"Oh, boy, she's showing up fine to-night!" suddenly exclaimed Mark when he had moved the telescope to a new field and had gazed through it earnestly.

"And by 'she' you refer to whom?" asked Jack, with a little chuckle.

"Venus," answered his chum. "Being at inferior conjunction, as she is now, Venus is nearer the earth than she will be for a long time."

"Oh, Venus," murmured Jack, with a sigh. "I thought you were referring to a moving picture star."

"You make me tired," said Mark. "If I didn't know you better than you know yourself—Oh, boy! Wow! Look here!" he suddenly cried as he shifted the telescope slightly. "This must be it! Oh, boy!"

Mark Sampson was wildly excited.

"What is it?" asked Jack, something of his friend's enthusiasm communicating itself to his own more phlegmatic nature.

"Looks like that dashing blue comet!" answered Mark. "No, it can't be a comet. No comet I ever heard about went as fast as that when observed from the earth. What is it, anyway?"

"Give me a look and I'll tell you," offered Jack. "But I can't pass any expert opinion while you're hogging the glass."

"Here! Have a look!" agreed Mark. "Hurry, or you'll miss it!"

He stepped aside and Jack applied his eye to the telescope.

"Do you see it?" asked Mark eagerly. "Why, I can see it myself now without the glass! There! I'll aim it for you!"

He changed the position of the powerful instrument slightly and a moment later Jack Darrow gave a startled cry.

"Boy, howdy! She sure is streaking it across the sky!" he yelled. "Must be doing two thousand miles an hour! And it's as blue as indigo! What the mischief is it?"

"Must be that airship-meteor the papers have been mentioning. Give me another look."

"Airship or meteor—whatever it is—it's mighty strange," murmured Jack as he relin-

quished the instrument to his chum and looked up into the sky with his naked eyes. "Yes, there it is!" he added.

"It's coming nearer!" suddenly cried Mark, and he turned to glance at his companion. "We must have Professor Henderson up to look at this! And telephone to Professor Hertz!" he went on. "He's an authority on astronomy. Maybe he can tell what this is."

"I hope somebody can," remarked Jack. "For it sure is the queerest thing I ever saw shooting around the sky."

The strange object appeared to be a haze of bright blue light, zigzagging back and forth in the heavens immediately above the home and workshops of the two young men. It moved so fast that no sooner was it in focus of the objective glass of the telescope than it had passed beyond the range of vision and the instrument had to be readjusted.

"Call Professor Henderson!" shouted Mark as he again put his eye to the telescope.

But there was no need to do this for at that moment the voice of Amos Henderson was heard at the foot of the stairs leading up to the observatory.

"Mark! Jack!" he called. "I wish you'd come down for a moment and listen to my radio."

"Radio!" exclaimed Jack. "We've got some-

thing more important to do than listen to a radio, Professor. You'd better come up!"

"I don't mean to come down to listen to any ordinary broadcasting," replied the aged scientist excitedly. "Something very strange is happening to my radio. Do come down!"

There was something in the professor's voice that caused the two young men, impressed as they were by the sight of that queer blue light in the sky, to hurry below.

As they entered the professor's apartment they heard strange splutterings, taps, and squeals coming from the loud speaker of the big radio set which gave the old man such enjoyment.

A voice was coming from the loud speaker, but such a voice and talking such a language as none of them had ever before heard. The words were fairly screamed out—words of terror, as could be guessed by the accent—but words that were meaningless, for they were in a language that none of the three had ever heard.

Then, suddenly, a queer, blue light filled the room. The incandescents flared up brightly and then went out. The blue light increased. A moment later there was a loud explosion and parts of the radio flew all over the room while an overpowering odor permeated the apartment.

CHAPTER II

THE BLUE FIRE

MARK SAMPSON seemed to be slowly coming back from a journey of a million miles into the depths of dark space. Jack Darrow afterward said it felt to him as if he were tossing up and down on big waves in a blue ocean. As for Professor Henderson, he remained in a stupor even after the young men had revived and had turned on the lights again, all the fuses in the building having been blown out.

But it was now in darkness that Mark and Jack first opened their eyes after some sort of shock that had rendered them unconscious for a moment. Mark found himself lying under the table. Jack was partly beneath a couch.

"I say, Jack, are you there?" called Mark, as his senses returned.

"Sure I'm here!" Jack answered. "But don't know where 'here' is. For all I can tell, I may be up on Venus or Mars. What happened? Is it the end of the world? I never thought it would be like this, though."

"Lucky it's no worse," remarked Mark.

"Yes, it's bad enough. I guess it struck around here somewhere."

"What struck?"

"That blue fire, meteor, comet, or whatever it was. Maybe it was lightning."

"Something happened all right," murmured Mark, crawling from beneath the table. "What's the matter with the lights?" he went on.

"All out, all over the place, I guess," Jack answered. "Wait a second. I have a flashlight in one of my pockets, if I can find it, and if that isn't on the fritz, too."

The little electric torch proved to be in working order, and by its gleam the two young men looked at the pieces of the radio set scattered all about the room, while in a corner lay the limp body of Professor Henderson.

"Is he dead?" asked Mark, in a low voice.

"No," answered Jack, who had placed a hand on the scientist's heart. "He's just knocked out for a while, that's all. We'll have to light up in some way and then get help."

"Go down to the cellar and look at the fuses," suggested Mark. "I think they're blown out."

This Jack found to be the case. When he had put in new ones by the light of his pocket torch and had returned to the room where the queer manifestation had taken place, he found that

Mark had partly revived the professor with a glass of water.

"What happened?" Amos Henderson wanted to know. He appeared to have suffered a severe shock.

"That's what we've got to find out," said Mark. "We were looking at a queer, blue meteor in the sky when you called us down to listen to your radio. It was cutting up."

"I never heard such queer noises," said the professor. "And, look!" he cried, pointing to the wreck of his beautiful set, pieces of which were scattered all over the room. "What did that?"

"The blue fire," replied Jack, and his usual joking manner had passed from him. "It was terrible!"

"Awful!" agreed Mark. "Boy, I'm all in!" and he staggered to a chair and sat down. Professor Henderson, too, was very weak and Jack had to assist him to the couch.

"There's some terrible mystery here," declared Jack, as he sank into a chair.

While the three are thus wondering and gazing blankly at one another, there will be an opportunity for a brief mention of the persons and circumstances that are to form the basis for this story.

Jack Darrow and Mark Sampson had been chums since they were thrown together by fate

some years before. They were both orphans, and while traveling about, waiting for fortune to decide certain things for them, they were involved in a train wreck and were taken care of by Professor Amos Henderson, a scientist who had a laboratory about a day's journey from New York City in a quiet country district. Washington White, the professor's faithful negro servant, aided in helping take care of Jack and Mark for a time.

Thus began their friendship with the aged inventor, and in the first volume of the series, entitled "Through the Air to the North Pole," are recorded some of the happenings when they built the *Electric Monarch* and went on a strange adventure cruise.

Since then Mark and Jack had helped the professor perfect other machines for travel, as will be found fully detailed in the books, "Under the Ocean to the South Pole" and "Five Thousand Miles Underground."

Their success in navigating on, under, and above the earth soon caused the young men and their friend to undertake more ambitious projects, as evidenced in "Through Space to Mars" and "Lost on the Moon." On these remarkable voyages they learned much that was new about astronomy and about the stars and planets whirling about in space. They were hardly prepared,

however, for what happened to them later, as can be read in "On a Torn-Away World." But even their adventures on that trip were discounted by the weird happenings which are related in the book just before the present one.

That volume is entitled "The City Beyond the Clouds" and relates how Mark Sampson and Jack Darrow and Professor Henderson were looking through their new telescope when a strange airship came into their range of vision. It was a most remarkable machine, and when it plunged into a lake they went to rescue whoever might be in it.

They saved Professor Gustavus Hertz from a watery grave and, when he recovered, he told a very strange story. He spoke of a "city" which, he said, was "beyond the clouds" on a world in perpetual shadow, inhabited by red dwarfs. There the professor's son and daughter, Max and Berta, were captives. Mark and Jack resolved to go to their rescue, which they did, with Professor Hertz and a company of picked men. They finally reached the strange city by means of an aircraft invented by the scientist whom they had rescued. Professor Henderson and Washington White, who had often before braved the perils of the air, were now too old to go on such trips.

Eventually, Berta and Max were rescued and

returned to earth with Mark, Jack, their father, and the others of the company.

For a time the two young scientists were content to rest, and Professor Hertz and his children, taking up their residence near the laboratory of Professor Henderson, slowly recovered from their terrible experiences.

"And now," said Jack, as he brought Professor Henderson another glass of water, "we seem to be on the verge of something else."

"Yes," agreed his chum. "Something terrible, if this is any evidence of the awful power of that blue fire," and he motioned to the scattered parts of the radio set which had so violently exploded.

"My friends, have you any idea what it was?" asked Professor Henderson, who was recovering from the shock.

"Not unless it was the near approach to earth of a meteor or a comet," suggested Jack.

"I'm sure that it was neither a meteor nor a comet that we were looking at," declared Mark.

"What was it, then?" his chum queried.

"Some queer kind of blue fire shot out by an aircraft."

"Aircraft?" questioned Amos Henderson, in evident surprise.

"Yes," replied Mark. "That's what I believe it was. It circled about the sky just as I have often seen Professor Hertz's craft circle. It

darted to and fro. No comet or meteor ever does that. They pursue a straight or elliptical course."

"Do you think it can be the inhabitants of Mars trying to signal us, and perhaps putting on too much power?" asked Jack.

"It might be," admitted Mark. "Whatever it was, there was some terrible power let loose! See how it knocked us about."

"Knocked us out, in fact!" chuckled Jack, his spirits rising again, now that there seemed to be no immediate danger.

"Is this the strange, blue streak of fire that the papers have been mentioning during the last week?" asked Professor Henderson.

"That's what we were looking at when you called to us to come and hear your radio," observed Mark. "But whether or not the blue fire was responsible for what happened, we don't know."

"It must be looked into," murmured the old man. "We must find out if our shops have been damaged or any of our machinery," for he and the young men had formed a manufacturing corporation and turned out many new and valuable scientific machines and instruments.

"I'll scurry around outside," offered Jack. "The house doesn't appear to have suffered much," he went on, referring to the laboratory

above which they had their living quarters and where the telescope was set up.

"I'll bet Washington White was mighty scared!" chuckled Mark. "We'll have him in here soon, asking if it's the end of the world."

There was a noise in the hall below and Jack said:

"Here he comes now, I believe."

But it was not the unctuous tones of the negro that came up to the waiting ones. Instead the loud and peculiar voice of Professor Hertz was audible.

"Are you herein?" he asked. In spite of his education, he, now and then, especially when excited, lapsed into an idiom of his native tongue.

"We're up here!" cried Jack. "Come on up, Professor."

"Did anything happen at your place?" asked Mark, for the other scientist had recently bought a house not far from the Henderson shops.

"Happen? I should say it did!" cried the German in vigorous accents. "I will about it tell you!"

He came running up the stairs, his clothing disheveled. He was evidently laboring under intense excitement. A strip of adhesive tape had been pasted across his nose, giving him a queer appearance.

"There is witchery afloat!" cried Professor

Hertz. "Just now, while I was to some of Wagner's divine music listening, suddenly flashes of blue fire in my room were. My radio to howl began!"

"So did mine!" exclaimed Professor Henderson.

"Ach! But listen! That is the worst not yet!" went on the German. "A most strange language came from my loud speaker."

"And from mine!" said Mr. Henderson.

"Ach! But not yet finished have I!" went on the other, raising a hand for silence. "My radio blew up!" and he fairly roared these words.

"So did mine!"

"Ach! So there is duplication!" gasped the German. "But even not yet have I finished. My radio danced all around before it blew up and, when it did, one large piece hit me on my nose! Behold!" and he pointed to the strip of tape. "Oh, it was terrible! Great events portend, my friends! We must be ready for them!"

CHAPTER III

A FACE AT THE WINDOW

PROFESSOR HERTZ circled rapidly about the room. The fact that his own experience had been duplicated so nearly among his friends, only added to the excitement of the scientist. And Professor Henderson and his young assistants, learning that they were not alone in hearing and witnessing the manifestations of the blue fire, wondered more and more what it could be.

"We must investigate this!" declared Professor Henderson, getting up from the couch.

"To the very bottom!" added his fellow inventor.

"Could it be all a joke?" asked Jack who, being a wag himself, was always ready to see a bit of fun in others.

"Joke!" cried Professor Hertz. "Call you this a joke?" and he tapped his skinned nose. "It was no joke, my friend!"

"What do you mean—joke?" asked Mark.

"Well," answered Jack, "I meant that perhaps some inventor with a queer idea of fun has been

shooting some newly discovered rays into the ether and they were more powerful than he realized. Come to think of it, couldn't that blue flash we saw darting to and fro in the sky be the beam of some new kind of searchlight?"

"It could," agreed Mark. "But how do you account for the fact that it has been seen in San Francisco? No searchlight ever made could project beams so they could be observed in New York and San Francisco at the same time."

"Wait a minute!" broke in Jack. "Who says the blue fire was seen in those two cities at the same time? No one! The accounts you read to me from the paper said the blue streak, zigzagging about, was seen over New York one night, over San Francisco the next and then it would be back over Manhattan."

"That's so," admitted Mark. "That would mean, in case this was either some sort of searchlight or some unknown ray, that there were two machines for projecting it."

There was another noise below as of some one entering the building and Jack went into the upper hall to look down. He thought it might be some of their neighbors coming in to ask about the strange manifestations. But a moment later a voice they all knew well exclaimed:

"Help! Help!"

"What's the matter, Wash?" asked Mark, as

the colored man began laboriously mounting the stairs.

"Mattah! Mattah? Mah sakes, whut ain't de mattah? Jest now I saw de mos' terrificable thundah sto'm whut evah was! Knocked me out o' mah bed an' it done spoiled all mah chickens!"

Thereupon the colored man detailed what went on in his quarters. He had no radio, nor had he been observing through a telescope. As a matter of fact, he had been in bed and asleep when he was suddenly aroused by the rattling of knives and forks in his kitchen. Then the room, he said, seemed to be filled with blue fire. He was tossed out of bed and when he managed to light a candle, for he clung to the old-fashioned illumination, he saw his knives and forks scattered around the room while pots and pans were strewn all over.

"There is something magnetic about that force," stated Professor Henderson. "It has a peculiar effect on metals."

"Suppose we take another look through the telescope and see if that queer blue streak is still flashing back and forth in the sky," suggested Jack.

"Good idea," agreed Mark. "Anyhow, we ought to look and see if our telescope is damaged. Maybe it's ruined!"

It was found that the strange blue fire had had

no effect on the optical instrument. Perhaps this was because it was insulated from the ground in order to reduce the earth tremors. After Mark had shifted the object lens about a bit, he turned from the eye piece and cried:

"There it is, but much fainter!"

"Let me see!" begged Professor Hertz eagerly.

In turn all four had another glimpse of the phenomenon, and all agreed that it was going away from the earth, growing fainter and fainter each minute until it faded from view completely.

The papers the next day had scare-heads telling about the visit of a comet or a meteor, as it was variously called. The two professors and their friends were not the only ones who had suffered painful and thrilling experiences from the unknown force. From all over the United States came reports of radios set to howling in a strange tongue, of other sets that had tubes burned out and some that had entirely disintegrated, like those of the two scientists.

From then on, every night for a week, from one part of the Western continents or another, but principally in the United States, came reports of that strange blue fire being seen in the sky, darting to and fro. The stories of damaged radios continued to pour in. These delicate pieces of electrical mechanism seemed to suffer most from the blight of the blue fire. Other

scientific instruments, in the same room with radio sets, were not even slightly affected.

Then the different attempts at explanation began to pour in to the papers. Some came from volunteers, few of whom were scientific enough to give a sound opinion. Others were the views of noted scientists interviewed by reporters.

The newspapers were much worked up over the affair and the best men were constantly on the watch, some in airships, some in fast autos, and others stationed at powerful telescopes, ready to report the first sign of the blue fire or to take off in pursuit of it. Opinions were divided as to whether the phenomenon was a celestial visitor, whether it was some new and powerful craft of the air guided by the inventor, a man of the earth, or whether the blue fire was the result of a visit of strangers from Mars or some other planet.

"There is only one thing to do!" declared Professor Hertz after a week of the mystery which became more baffling each day. "I will hasten work on my new craft and we will ourselves pursue this will-o'-the-wisp—this *ignis fatuus*—that is playing with us. As well to chase the tornado on roller skates as for the average airship to take after those blue fires. It needs the speed of my *Asteroid!*"

"How nearly is she finished?" asked Mark, re-

ferring to the new craft which Professor Hertz had been working on for some time.

"If you would help me, I could have her ready in a month!" was the answer.

"Then we'll help!" cried Jack. "We'll start to-night!"

Then began a period of intensive work, during which, much to the disappointment of the scientists, the blue fire seemed to have disappeared. There were no more reports of the strange lights in the sky.

"But we will not give up!" cried Professor Hertz. "We will yet the mystery solve."

One rainy night Jack Darrow and Mark Sampson were in their own private laboratory on the ground floor of their shop building. They had with them some scientific instruments and controls designed to be fitted into the *Asteroid,* and because they had the tools and machinery best suited to do the work, Mark and Jack had brought the pieces to their own plant.

"Some storm!" remarked Jack as he sat at a bench near a window, working with a micrometer under a shaded light.

"You said it!" echoed his chum. "Did you hear that?"

"Couldn't very well help it!" chuckled Jack, though the sound of his mirth was muffled in a terrific clap of thunder.

Following that terrible crack, which decided the young inventors to give up work for the night, there came a short interval of calm. In the midst of that silence there came a noise at the door, as if some one was trying to come in.

"What's that?" whispered Mark hoarsely, his nerves on edge, like those of his chum.

Jack stretched out his hand toward a revolver on the bench near him, for, more than once, unscrupulous men had sought to steal the secrets of the inventors. Then Mark pointed to a window in front of which but a moment before he and his chum had been seated.

"Look!" he exclaimed.

As Jack turned toward the casement he beheld a strange, white face staring in at Mark and him from out of the storm and darkness—the face of a woman showing either deadly fear or pain, or both.

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN IN BLUE

For several seconds the two young inventors remained staring at the woman's white face the eyes of which stared back at them, big with wonder and with voiceless appeal. Then Mark cried:

"Jack, I believe it's a hold-up! Don't take any chances!" This time Mark reached for his revolver.

"Hold up?" questioned Jack. "That woman? Nonsense! She's just caught out in the storm and is looking for shelter."

"We can't take any chances!" repeated Mark. "She looks like a woman, but that blue, hooded garment she's wearing was never purchased in this neighborhood. Then, remember the trick that Boston gang tried on us! One man was dressed like a woman when they tried to learn the secret of our moon traveler."

"Yes, that's so," admitted Jack. "But she seems to be all alone. We can't leave her out in this terrible storm, old man."

The woman now raised one dripping wet hand, which showed curiously frail and white in the rain and blackness, and pointed toward the door which she had ineffectually tried to open.

"She wants to come in!" exclaimed Jack.

"Sure! That's what that other gang wanted —to get in here," said Mark. "I'm taking no chances."

"You're too suspicious!" retorted his chum. "Here goes! Around to the side, lady!" he called loudly.

A gust of wind and a dash of rain rushed in through the opened door, while the noise of the raging elements seemed redoubled to the ears of the young men. Peering out into the storm and darkness, they saw a moving figure framed in the patch of illumination from the lights of their laboratory.

A moment later the woman in blue entered the room, staggering, rather than walking, water dripping from her strange garments and from her frail, white hands that hung from beneath a circular blue cloak that was part of her costume. Big, pathetic eyes stared at the young men from her white face on which the raindrops glistened. She seemed a frail, slight figure to be out in all that wind, rain, thunder and lightning.

"Why, she's only a girl!" impulsively exclaimed Jack, as she came into full veiw, and, truly, slen-

der and graceful, she seemed no more than eighteen or nineteen years of age.

Mark lowered his automatic in an ashamed fashion and thrust it into his pocket, for it was soon evident that the woman in blue was alone.

"Come in!" cordially invited Jack, and he held out his hands, for the woman appeared to stagger from weakness. She put her hands in Jack's and Mark closed the door.

"What's the matter?" asked Mark, for it seemed there must be something of more than ordinary moment afoot to bring a woman of such evident refinement as this one in blue out on such a night.

For a moment she did not answer, but stood swaying there in the laboratory, water dripping from every point of her blue garments. Then, with a little smile that lightened up to some extent her anxious face, she spoke slowly and with a peculiar accent.

"You are—you are—" she murmured in halting tones, as though her tongue found difficulty in framing the words, "you are Darrow, Jack and—and Sampson, Mark?"

It was a question, that was evident. She wanted to know the identity of the two young men before proceeding.

"You are—you are?" she inquired again, not repeating the names—in directory fashion—ap-

parently because she found the language too hard to use more than was necessary.

"Sure! That's who we are!" exclaimed the impulsive Jack. "Only you have the cart before the horse."

"Cart—horse?" the woman in blue repeated slowly, and she gazed in wonder about the room, though she seemed in nowise astonished at the strange mechanical devices on every hand.

"Jack only means that you gave our names backward," explained Mark, quick to understand that the idiomatic simile was lost on their visitor. "I am Mark Sampson and he is Jack Darrow. You have come to the right place if you want us."

"Yes! Greatly much do I want you," she said, and she seemed to the young men to have difficulty in talking, not only because of using a strange language, but also from physical exhaustion. She went on with an effort: "Truly you are Sampson, Mark—and Darrow, Jack?"

"Sure! That's right! Use our names backward if it's any easier for you!" said Jack, kindly. "Only tell us what the matter is."

"Better get her a chair so she can sit down," said Mark in a low voice to his chum. "She seems to be all in!"

"That's right!" agreed Jack, and he brought forward a chair for the woman in blue. She smiled her thanks and was about to sit on it when

she nerved herself by a great effort, pressed one hand to her head and, looking from one to the other, pleaded:

"Help me you will?"

"Of course we'll help you!" exclaimed Jack.

"Maybe we'd better get Professor Hertz," suggested Mark. "She is evidently a German by the way she transposes her words. He would find it easy to talk to her."

"Let's see what we can learn ourselves," said Jack in a low voice. "I fancy the professor won't relish coming out on a night like this. If you will tell us what the trouble is, lady," he went on, "we'll do what we can for you. Has there been an auto smash?" This was the most likely explanation that occurred to him.

"Help must we have or we perish—and soon!" were the startling words that came from the lips of the woman in blue. "Oh, help us! Help us!" she pleaded.

Then, before either of the young men could spring to catch her, she slumped down on the floor in a faint, clutching at the chair as she fell.

CHAPTER V

A WONDER TALE

"WHAT do you know about that?" gasped Jack Darrow, looking with rather pathetic helplessness at the prostrate figure of the woman in blue.

"It's no time for asking questions!" snapped Mark. "Help me lift her up on that couch and then get some water and aromatic spirits of ammonia. We've got to revive her."

"If she's alive," murmured Jack dubiously.

"Of course she's alive!" exclaimed Mark. "It's nothing but a faint. She's exhausted from tramping through the storm—that's all. She'll be all right in a few minutes."

"Hope so," sighed Jack, and he assisted his chum in lifting the limp form to a couch that formed part of the laboratory furniture.

"We've got to get some of her wet things off," said Mark. "She must be drenched."

But when they had removed the outer cloak and cape, finding beneath it other garments of that queer, blue tint, the young men discovered

that the stranger's dress was quite dry. The cloak was waterproof and even the driving storm had not penetrated it. Her shoes, too, seemed to have shed the water admirably.

As soon as she had been placed in a comfortable position on the couch, Mark hurried to a medicine cabinet on the wall and got some spirits of ammonia. A little of this was put into a glass of water. But by the time it was prepared she had opened her eyes. She waved it away with a faint smile.

"You had better drink it," urged Mark. "It will bring back your strength."

"I can drink—only this," she said, and from some hidden pocket in her dress she produced a small white flask filled with a blue liquid. This flask she put to her lips and seemed to drink a few drops. "Ah, now much better I am," she said, and she seemed to gain new strength from her mysterious potion.

"What is it?" asked Jack, as a strange odor filled the room.

"Bitam, the blue water of life," answered the woman, with a smile. "It is all I ever take. But thanks to you for what you have done."

With the revival of her strength, the woman seemed better able to talk. Not only did she cease hesitating over words but she succeeded usually in placing them in their logical order.

"Now, since you seem better, perhaps you can tell us what the trouble is and how we can help you," suggested Mark when their visitor was sitting up.

"It is a very strange tale," said the woman in blue. "If I could only talk to you in my own language——" She made a little hopeless gesture and said a few words in a strange tongue —words that brought to Mark and Jack a haunting memory of something that, for a time, they could not fix. As the woman still continued to murmur those strange words, Mark Sampson exclaimed:

"We must have Professor Hertz over here, storm or no storm!"

"Hertz!" cried Jack.

"Sure! He's a linguist. He understands a dozen languages besides his own German. We'll be able to help her a lot better if we don't have to guess at what she means."

"You're right!" agreed Jack. "I'll telephone him."

He went to a desk instrument and was soon in connection with the operator, though there was trouble, owing to the storm, which had carried away some wires. But at last Jack had Professor Hertz on the line and began to explain the matter to him in a low voice.

Meanwhile the woman in blue, still seated on

the couch, looked at Jack, at the telephone and then, speaking to Mark, said, questioningly:

"He is speaking to some one distant?"

"Yes, to a learned friend of ours who may be able to talk your language."

"My language!" exclaimed the visitor, with a smile. "It would be wonderful if any one on this earth of yours could do that. But why does he have to wait so long and use that machine to speak with some one who is distant?" Her diction and words were much clearer now.

"Why, it's a telephone," said Mark, in surprise. "One must always use that when talking to some one who is half a mile away or farther. It's in part a wireless telephone, at that, if you think we're out of date."

"But why use any instrument at all to communicate with a distant person?" asked the woman.

"You've got to use a telephone of some sort," said Mark.

"Why?" she persisted. "Why not send the thought direct from one brain to the other—like this?"

She touched her head, pointed her hand at Mark and then that young man experienced a peculiar sensation as she looked at him fixedly with those big eyes of hers. He afterward said that it was as though he were being hypnotized,

and in his ears was a strange buzzing. Then, through the buzzing, came a voice speaking distinctly, though, as he watched the woman's lips, they did not move.

But the strangest part of it all was that, though Mark plainly heard words that were not spoken, he could not understand them. They were in a foreign language and one he had never before heard, though he and Jack had traveled in many distant lands and were more or less familiar with German, French, Spanish and Italian.

Mark shook his head in despair at this manifestation of the secret, silent, telepathic powers of the woman in blue and she laughed gently at his bewilderment.

At that moment Jack hung up the receiver. He had heard nothing of the talk between Mark and the visitor, or, if he had, he paid no heed to it. Nor did he seem to have felt any of the strange thought transference.

"Professor Hertz will be right over," Jack reported. "At first he thought we'd had another glimpse of the blue fire. But I told him it was only a lady who spoke some strange language who had been in an auto smash."

"There was no auto smash," said Mark in a low voice. "It's something a whole lot more mysterious than that. Maybe the professor can help us get to the bottom of it."

"Mysterious?" murmured Jack.

"I should say so!" said Mark, passing his hand over his eyes. The echoes of that strange wordless voice he had heard seemed to cloud his brain. But the woman in blue appeared to be anxious to go on with her tale without waiting for the arrival of Professor Hertz. She began to speak, at times using fairly good English, and again lapsing into the kind of talk that Jack described as "putting the cart before the horse." But even with this handicap, the young inventors were aware that she was telling a twisted, grotesque tale, weird to the point, almost, of disbelief. As some of the truth began to filter through their minds they looked at each other in amazement mingled with fear and terror.

Concrete evidence was before their eyes that here was a being from another world! Yes, a being from another world! That was what they understood the woman in blue to be!

"Wait! Wait!" cried Mark, in a flutter of excitement as the woman tried to explain more in detail. "We are getting in deeper and deeper! Wait until Professor Hertz comes. Maybe you can talk to him in your own language."

"That I very much doubt," said the woman in blue, with a smile.

"Well, maybe you can transfer some thoughts to him, then."

"What do you mean—thought transference?" asked Jack.

"Wait until you experience what I did while you were at the telephone," answered Mark, again putting his hand to his head.

There was a noise at the door, a noise heard above a sudden lull in the storm, and the bluff, genial, German scientist entered.

"So, you have a mystery for me?" he asked in his deep voice. "What is it?"

For a moment he did not see the woman in blue. Then Mark and Jack indicated her and the big scientist at once doffed his hat, shook from it a shower of raindrops, and made a low, profound bow.

"I am honored to meet you, madam," he said. Then he seemed impressed by something in her appearance and gazed at her intently. She was now smiling at him and did not appear to be in any whit disconcerted by his sharp glances.

"Do you know her?" asked Jack eagerly. "She has been trying to tell us of some trouble she is in and wants our help. But we can't make much of her tale. Do you know who she is?"

"I know who she is *not!*" said the professor with strange emphasis. "She is not of this world!"

"Then who—what——" began Mark.

He was interrupted by the woman in blue who

began speaking in her own tongue to Professor Hertz. He listened with an amazed look on his face, a look that changed to one almost of terror, and then he held up his hand, at the same time bowing in respect, imploring silence for a moment.

"Did you understand her language?" asked Mark.

"Only a word here and there," was the answer. "But it is the language that my radio transmitted the other night before it was blown to atoms by the blue fire. It was those strange words that came over my radio!"

Then Jack and Mark remembered. They, too, had heard strange words coming from their radio before it blew apart. They had been trying, ever since the advent of their strange visitor, to remember where they had before heard her strange language. Now like a flash, with the scientist's explanation, it came to them.

"It is past belief! Past belief!" murmured Professor Hertz, sinking into a chair. "It is staggering—astounding—overpowering!"

"What is?" asked Jack and Mark in the same breath while the woman in blue regarded the three with a quizzical smile.

"Her wonder tale," answered the scientist. "Boys, can you guess where our visitor is from?"

Mark and Jack shook their heads.

"She is from the planet Venus!" exclaimed Professor Hertz.

"Venus!" cried the young men. They could not believe it.

At the mention of her home planet the woman in blue nodded and smiled happily—at least more happily than heretofore.

"Yes," she said, "I am from Venus. But unless I get back there soon—I and my friends—we shall all perish. That is why I came to you for help." She held out her little white hands appealingly.

"Your friends!" burst out Jack. "Are there more of you?"

"Not here," said the woman, as Jack hastened toward the door. "But they are not far off. Shall I tell my tale to you?" and she looked at Professor Hertz.

"Tell it! I should say so!" cried Jack.

"The sooner the better!" added Mark. "Has it anything to do with that queer, blue light we saw in the sky?" he asked, turning to Professor Hertz.

"It has everything to do with it," said the scientist, and there was awe in his voice. "Listen to her tale! I know the rudiments of her tongue, which is similar in root formation to an ancient language that was used at the beginning of our world and which died away even before the last

glacial age, but of which there are still traces among primitive tribes. Listen to her wonder tale."

The woman began her story. She told it partly in English, partly in that strange language which Professor Hertz translated, and some of it in the Gypsy tongue. This puzzled her auditors until they learned how she had acquired some of the talk of those Romany wanderers.

By piecing together the fragments of the story of the woman in blue, they learned that her name was Gozona and, though she seemed young, she was a noted scientist from the planet Venus where time is only half as long as it is on this earth of ours. So, though Gozona was forty years old, as time is computed on our planet, she was really like an earth girl of twenty.

"But how did you get here from Venus?" asked Jack, hardly able to believe even the preliminaries of the staggering story.

"In the blue fire," answered Gozona.

"Blue fire!" cried Mark.

"It wasn't really blue fire, though it had that appearance," explained Professor Hertz, who, better able to understand Gozona's mixture of tongues, had grasped more of her story. "It's a sort of airship, a self-propelling projectile that was started from Venus and fell to our earth."

"Was she in it?" asked Jack.

"Yes, I, Gozona, and my cousin, Pritexa," was the answer of the woman in blue. "He, too, is a scientist seeking truth. Some months ago we decided to project ourselves into space to investigate some of the planets and stars about us. We entered our projectile, with its engine of gold, and started off. But something went wrong, and when we landed on your earth our machine was wrecked. We, fortunately, escaped injury."

"Where did that blue airship fall?" asked Mark. "I'd like to get a look at what's left of it."

"So should I!" echoed his chum.

"You will see it, if we have luck," promised Professor Hertz. "Her craft fell in the mountains about ten miles from here."

"So that's the reason we didn't see that darting blue streak any more!" exclaimed Mark. "It fell."

"It wasn't her airship that we saw, but another," said the scientist. "She left Venus several weeks ago, perhaps about two months, and has been living on this earth since."

"Then, what was the blue streak we saw?" asked Jack.

"Another projectile from Venus," answered the scientist.

"Whew!" whistled Mark. "Two of 'em!"

"I will tell you the rest quickly," said Gozona,

"for we must go to the rescue of my friends. After my cousin Pritexa and I were wrecked," she resumed, "we sent a thought message to Venus, asking that we be rescued. They sent another craft after us, and it was this second one that has been darting about your planet for some time. They were seeking us but could not find us until recently. Then, in descending into the mountains where Pritexa and I were held captives, their ship was damaged so that it cannot leave the earth. Thus the two craft were wrecked and Soli and Jantu, my two friends who came to our rescue, are hurt. That is why I said that unless you help us," and she motioned to Mark and Jack, "we shall all perish. We must soon get back to Venus. We have but little food left."

"Food!" cried Jack. "Why, there is plenty of food on this earth."

"Listen!" commanded Professor Hertz in a strange voice. "We have not yet heard all the wonder tale."

CHAPTER VI

OUT IN THE STORM

GOZONA reached into another pocket of her blue dress and brought out another small flask. This, instead of being filled with an indigo-hued liquid, contained one of a beautiful red tint. She held it up so that the light shone through it and said to the young inventors and the German-American scientist:

"This is all the food we Venusians require. It is the distilled odors of flowers and herbs, and on this earth of yours there grow very few flowers that will suffice."

As she spoke, she took the stopper from the small bottle and breathed gently of the perfume that came forth. It filled the room with its odor, pungent but not unpleasant.

"With Bitam, the blue water to drink, and Gasto, the flower odors to inhale, we from Venus can live," said Gozona. "But we have not much of either left in the wrecks of our craft. So if we would survive we must get back to our planet."

"But if your airships are smashed how are you

going to do that?" asked Jack. "Unless——" He stopped abruptly at the thought which came to him.

"We rely on you," said Gozona, glancing from Jack to Mark and then at Professor Hertz. "Your reputation as wonderful scientists has penetrated even to the mountains where Pritexa and I were held captives."

"Captives!" cried Jack.

"Our first craft, in which my cousin and I left Venus, was wrecked in the mountains back there," and she pointed to a range of hills to the north. They were hardly to be called mountains, but were a part of the Adirondack chain. "Because they feared us, we were held by some Gypsies," she added.

"Which," explained Professor Hertz, "accounts for some Romany words she uses."

"From these Gypsies, who would not release me or my cousin, I learned to talk a little English," went on Gozona. "And it was from them that I learned of you as being great scientists," she added, indicating by a wave of her hand the three spellbound listeners.

"We aren't exactly scientists," said Mark, with a laugh. "Not Jack and I."

"But you have made craft that traveled to Mars and to the moon, have you not?" asked the visitor from Venus.

"Oh, yes, we did that," agreed Jack, modestly enough.

"Then everything will be all right," went on Gozona, in relieved tones. "You can devise a way to get us back to Venus; me and my cousin and also Soli and Jantu who came in the second ship and who are, I fear, badly hurt."

"Making a craft that will go from here to Venus!" murmured Mark. "Some contract!"

"We can do it!" exclaimed his chum. "It won't be any harder than going from here to the moon or to Mars nor any harder than our last trip to the City Beyond the Clouds."

"Yes, it can be done," assented Professor Hertz, nodding his big head as he quickly thought away the difficulties.

She then went on with her story, telling that, after she and her cousin had first landed in their wrecked airship on this planet after their daring voyage, they had been held by some Gypsies, a band of whom were encamped in the mountains about ten miles away.

"They thought we were crazy," and Gozona laughed lightly. "So they would not let us go out of their camp. Otherwise they treated us well, but they were suspicious of us and kept us under guard. They could not understand why Pritexa and I would eat none of their food. But we had our Bitam and Gasto. Then the other

blue ship came to rescue us and landed near us. But that was also wrecked in a storm."

"But how did your friends in the rescue ship know where to search for you?" asked Mark.

"They did not, at first," answered Gozona. "That is why they had to fly back and forth across your America, looking for us. It was necessary for Soli and Jantu to fly about until they got into thought-wave communication with me. All the while their ship was darting to and fro I was trying to get through a message to them, telling them where to land to rescue us from the Gypsies. Finally I did, a few days ago.

"But, alas! Their ship was also wrecked, so there was no way for Pritexa and me to get back to Venus. All four of us were held captive. I at once began to send thought waves up to our planet, praying for another rescue craft, but I realized that before it could get here we might all be dead from lack of proper food. So there seemed to be only one thing to do—seek your help.

"The Gypsies had spoken of you and knew that you had your shops and laboratories here," went on Gozona. "I managed to slip away to come here. I was afraid lest the civil or military authorities take me in charge as an alien," she went on, with a smile, "so I had to travel in

secret and keep hidden. But at length I managed to get here just as the storm burst."

"It certainly burst!" said Jack.

"And so here I am, and to you I appeal for help to get back to Venus," went on the woman in blue. "You will help us, will you not?" she pleaded and held out her hands pathetically.

"We will do all we can," promised the German-American, looking at the two adventurous young men.

"Surely," they murmured.

"But," went on the scientist, "it will take some time to complete the *Asteroid,* which is the only possible way to reach Venus."

"There is another way," said Gozona.

"How?"

"In the craft by which I and my friends reached your earth."

"But I thought you said both your blue airships were wrecked," exclaimed Jack.

"So they were," answered Gozona. "But certain parts of the two craft can be utilized. I think from the wrecks of the two you might be able to construct one good craft and in that you could take us to Venus."

"We take you?" cried Jack.

"Why not?" asked Gozona with another of her pleasing smiles. "There are many things of interest on our planet. Why not visit it?"

"Not a bad idea at that!" murmured Mark. "We'll think about it."

"I knew you would help me," said the woman in blue. "But you will pardon me if I urge haste. My friends have very little Bitam, or Gasto remaining in their flasks. Unless they are to die it will be needful that we start back to Venus within a month."

"How fast can your ship go, provided we can repair one with parts of the other?" asked Mark. "How long would we be on the way?"

"Not long," was the answer. "Our blue fire and power powder are both very strong."

"Power powder?"

"I will tell you about that later," promised Gozona. "But can you hasten a little and go with me to the mountains where my friends are so anxiously waiting?"

"What about these Gypsies?" asked Jack. "Will they make any trouble?"

"They were about to move their encampment when I came away," was the answer. "I do not believe they counted on taking us with them. In fact, my friends said they would fight if they were removed from the place where the ships are wrecked. So I think you will have no trouble with the Gypsies."

"We must help her," said Mark in a low voice.

"Surely," agreed Professor Hertz. "Think of the chance for new scientific observation on Venus!" he added, rubbing his hands. "I shall be delighted to go."

"Then let us start now!" proposed Gozona. "Have you one of those queer machines you call auto—auto—automobiles?" She seemed to have difficulty with the word.

"Surely!" said Mark. "Don't you have them on Venus?"

"We have thought carriages," was the answer. "We get on a platform mounted on wheels, and by concentrating our minds on the place we wish to visit, we roll along the ground or sail through the air as we please. We never have to bother with those funny things I heard the Gypsies talk about—gasoline, spark plugs, and gears, whatever they may be," and she laughed, almost merrily.

"Some gas buggy—a thought carriage!" murmured Jack. "But shall we start out now?" he asked his friends. "In this storm?"

"Why not?" Mark wanted to know. "We've traveled in worse storms than this and have come through earthquakes. This isn't anything and we can take my big car. It isn't as flexible as one of your thought carriages," he said to the woman in blue, "and I have to use gasoline and spark plugs and change gears. But it will get us there."

"Then come!" she urged. "It is wonderfully kind of you. Let us lose no time. Oh, I shall soon be back on my beloved Venus!" she murmured.

"If we have luck!" said Jack in a low voice.

Mark brought his big auto to the door of the laboratory and they all got in. Gozona explained that the Gypsies had several autos, which were the only ones she had ever seen before she started on her trip from the camp to Freeport. She had a keen, intelligent mind and was able to understand anything of a mechanical nature. She was wonderfully adept at language and had thus been able, with only a short stay among the Gypsies, to pick up a fairly good vocabulary.

"Well, I wonder what we'll find?" said Mark to his chum, who sat with him on the front seat while Professor Hertz was in the rear with Gozona.

"Maybe it's all a pipe dream," responded Jack.

"No, I think we are in for some strange adventures, Jack," and after events proved that Mark was right.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHIPS FROM VENUS

FAMILIAR as they were with all the roads around their home city, Mark and Jack, driving Professor Hertz and the woman in blue through the storm into the mountains, were hardly prepared for the troubles they encountered. There were stretches of hard roads where the auto went along very well, though even here, in one place, a culvert had washed out and they were nearly wrecked.

But when they turned off the main highway and had to travel on a dirt road which led to the Gypsy camp, then it was, indeed, hard going.

Lurching from side to side, swaying so at times that it seemed about to tip over, the car was pushed forward. Now Mark eased it down into some gully made by the rain, again he was driving it up the steep and mucky slope of a veritable valley which, before the storm, had not existed.

"It's lucky we brought the chains," remarked Jack when, at one point, they had to stop and adjust these aids.

"That's true enough," agreed Mark. "Are we going right, Miss—er—Mrs. Gozona?" he asked the woman in blue, who sat in the rear with the kindly and fatherly old German.

"You may call me Gozona," she said graciously. "On Venus a woman keeps the name to which she is born, marriage does not change it as with you people of the earth. Not that I am married," she added, and, though neither of the young men cared to admit it, both Jack and Mark felt heart thrills at hearing this. For Gozona was distinctly a beautiful woman, or rather, judged by earth standards, a girl.

"Yes, this is the road I came," she added. "We are almost there."

"And you came over this road in such a storm as this?" asked Professor Hertz in amazement.

"It was not storming when I started," said the girl from Venus. "I wandered about, making cautious inquiries here and there, before I located your workshops. It was only when the storm broke, a short time before I came to your place, that I was in much distress. However, my blue cloak kept me dry."

Even at that the young men and their German friend wondered at the pluck and determination of Gozona which led her to seek help, as she had done, in that outburst of the elements. In spite

of her grit, the wind and rain had been almost too much for her toward the end.

The headlights of the auto, powerful as they were, would hardly have sufficed to guide the travelers on their road had it not been for the almost constant blazing of lightning which still marked the progress of the storm. But by means of the vivid flashes, Mark was able to keep the machine on some sort of course. Directed now and then by Gozona, he made turns at certain places and at last she called:

"Careful now! We are almost there, but the road is very bad. I think you had better leave your queer automobile here and we will walk the remaining distance."

"Queer auto!" murmured Mark, a little nettled by the implied aspersion on his machine. "I think the old boat did pretty well to bring us through without a broken spring or axle."

"Ah, yes," and Gozona laughed a little. "But if you had one of the thought cars of Venus you could now float through the air to the location of our ships."

"It would be an advantage," chuckled Jack. "But I guess we can walk it if you show us the way."

They left the auto on the edge of what seemed to be a steep descent into a valley and plodded on through the storm down a path which Gozona

seemed able to pick out with no trouble. Her ability to see in the dark, and especially after a lightning flash that left the others almost blinded for a moment, was remarkable.

"The folks on Venus must have cats' eyes," whispered Mark to his chum.

"You aren't insinuating that Gozona is a cat, I hope!" said Jack quickly.

"Of course not. Still, she can see like one."

The woman in blue had taken the lead, and a few minutes later, after the travelers had slipped and slid their way down into the valley, she called:

"We are here! Stand for a moment, if you please, until I announce your arrival to my friends. If you come upon them suddenly they may act too impulsively."

"I wonder what she means by that?" asked Jack of his chum.

"Oh, I suppose she means that Pritexa and the other two might be asleep and if we rushed them they might think it was the Gypsies cutting up and they'd start a fight."

"These Venusians must be queer ducks," suggested Jack. "That is, all but Gozona. She's a peach!" he added, with whispered enthusiasm.

"She sure is!" agreed Mark.

Suddenly there was such a bright flash of lightning that it seemed as if the whole heavens had

split open, revealing the eternal fires beyond them, and the place was made as bright as day.

And in this glaring light the two young men and Professor Hertz saw, just ahead of them, in a little clearing amid the trees, two queer craft. They were the wrecked ships from Venus.

The lightning glare lasted long enough for the three to observe that the machines resembled, roughly, great projectiles, conical on one end and flat on the other. In length, measuring from cone point to base, each was, perhaps, seventy feet and in diameter about twenty feet. A gigantic skyrocket, without the stick, would be a good simile.

Before the fire from the sky died out the young men and the scientist had a chance to note that one of the Venus ships was badly damaged, being, in fact, split open. The other seemed to be in better condition. There were openings, or ports, along the sides of each one, evidently windows through which the travelers inside could watch their progress through space.

The blinding flash was followed by such a terrific clap of thunder that it stunned the three, causing them to stagger and clutch at trees for support.

But if Gozona felt any ill effects she did not manifest them. When the echoes and rumbles of the terrible blast had died away her voice was

heard calling in that strange language which had previously been heard coming from the radios before their annihilation. She seemed to be summoning her friends in the projectile ships.

A moment later there was silence, a silence so profound after that terrific blast as to be almost as awe inspiring. Then the pelting rain ceased as if by magic. The storm had ended in that awful outburst.

Darkness so profound followed the blinding glare that it seemed like a piece of black velvet draped over the heads of the travelers.

"Have we gone blind?" Jack murmured to his chum. For a terrible moment he feared this.

A moment later voices sounded from the craft from Venus and out of the ports of the one the least damaged shone streaks of that strange, blue fire that had caused such a sensation when observed flitting about in the sky.

"My friends are all right," said Gozona. "Come, and I will make you known to them and then you will help us back to Venus. But we must hurry!" she added, and there was terror in her voice. "Oh, but we must hurry! There is little blue water left and the essence of flowers will soon be gone. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ENGINE OF GOLD

INCREASING in intensity, the blue light from one of the strange projectile-shaped craft enveloped the three scientists and showed them the figure of Gozona walking rapidly toward the airship. A circular door was open in one side, if a cylindrical object can be said to have a side, and, framed in the illumination that streamed from it, two men could be seen. They were attired in white suits, but the blue fire seemed to stain them to an ultramarine hue. One of the men appeared to be about the age of Jack and Mark. The other was older.

They waved their hands toward Gozona and, for a moment, did not appear to be aware of the presence of the three rescuers. Then the woman in blue spoke in her strange tongue and she seemed to be informing her companions that she had come back with help, for a little later the two in the circular doorway directed their gaze toward Jack, Mark and Professor Hertz.

"Will you come in, my friends?" said Gozona,

turning to those whom she had brought with her. "Then you will be able to tell how soon you can help us get back to Venus. Come and I will present you to Soli and Pritexa. Alas, poor Jantu is not able to move about much." She turned to ask some question of the older of the two in the projectile and, receiving an answer, went on: "But he is mending fast and will be able to assist you in the work."

"You mean the work of getting back to Venus?" asked Professor Hertz.

"Yes. I have hopes," replied Gozona, "that you will be able to use the best parts of the worst damaged of our two ships to mend the second so we may make the return voyage. Please an examination make," she begged, in her excitement lapsing again into her Germanic style, "and see if you good news for us have."

Jack, Mark and the professor moved toward the door in the projectile, the two Venusians bowing toward them in greeting. Then, suddenly, Mark remembered the damaging effect the blue fire had had on the radio outfits.

"Will it be safe for us to go in there?" he asked Gozona.

"Safe? Why not?" she asked in surprise.

"Well," said Mark, "while your rescue craft was cruising about in the sky, trying to find you and Pritexa, the impulses from it, electrical or

whatever they are, created havoc on the earth. You and your friends may be immune, but if we go in——"

"Have no fear!" interrupted Gozona, with a silvery laugh. "The blue fire will not affect either you or us. It is but the manifestation of wave force from Venus. Without this wave force we would not be able to live or travel back and forth. Though it sometimes has a disastrous effect on radio tubes and sets, as you told me, it is perfectly harmless to almost everything else. Have no fear."

Thereupon the three adventurers followed Gozona into the strange craft. That same blue, hazy light was over everything. Whence it came neither Mark, Jack, nor the professor could tell from their first hurried glances. It appeared to be some kind of unknown ray.

The three found themselves in a living room, not unlike those they had built into their own space-flying machines, or it might be compared to the cabin of a submarine. There were some stools and a table, but everything was made and laid out with a view to conserving space. On the table were what appeared to be periodicals, but on taking one up, Jack was startled to discover that the pages were made of thin gold leaves and that the printing, of course in a language unknown to him, was in letters of silver.

"They must be rich, up on Venus!" thought the young man.

But now Gozona was introducing her friends to the professor and his helpers.

"This," she said to Professor Hertz, indicating the older man of the two Venusians present, "is my cousin Pritexa. This," pointing to the younger occupant of the cabin, "is Soli. He, with Jantu, who is injured, came to rescue us."

She then made some explanation in her own tongue to her friends and, with a smile, went on in the kind of talk best understood by Jack, Mark and the professor:

"My friends will be able to talk to you in English, for, as did I, they also learned from the Gypsies. But in order to make them understand more quickly, I made in my own language the explanations of how I found you and how you have so greatly and kindly offered to help us."

"I'm not sure we can," said the professor. "A trip to Venus, in a projectile machine we know nothing about the force of and in one that is damaged at that, is not to be undertaken lightly."

"Oh, but I am sure you can do it!" cried Gozona. "You have done such marvels in traveling to Mars and the moon, and to the City Beyond the Clouds. Venus is nearer to earth than is Mars and soon will approach her maximum in-

ferior conjunction, which will greatly lessen the distance."

"It isn't the distance so much," said the professor, "as it is the fact that we know nothing of this style of aircraft. And you say it is damaged."

"Not beyond repair," said Gozona. She held out her slim, white hands in pathetic appeal.

"We'll help you!" exclaimed Jack impulsively.

"Sure!" cried Mark, his eyes sparkling.

"Very good it is of you," said Pritexa in his precise and rather laborious English.

"I can help!" exclaimed Soli eagerly. "I helped build these machines!"

"Now if you five will talk a little, I will go see how Jantu is and then I will come back and we can make plans," said Gozona.

She went to a little cabinet in the wall and took from it a flask of the blue water. Then she left the main cabin.

"You will, perhaps, like to look through our craft," courteously suggested Pritexa to the three visitors. "This is not the one in which my cousin and I journeyed from Venus," he added. "That one lies out there, a sad wreck, from which we were lucky to escape with our lives. Owing to an accident to the mechanism, this one, too, was wrecked, but not so badly, though both the operators, Soli and Jantu, were hurt."

"Do these craft only hold two?" asked Jack. He was wondering how four were going to be able to journey back to Venus in one, provided it could be repaired.

"Oh, no," answered Pritexa, with a smile. "We have room for ten on either craft. So there will be space for you three," he added.

"You seem to take it for granted that we are going back with you," said Mark, with a smile.

"It would be to your advantage to do so," suggested Pritexa. "There is much on Venus of scientific value. There is, however, the question of earthly food for you to consider. You could not live on our Bitam and Gasto. But I understand you have concentrated foods that you can take with you."

"We could manage that part of it," agreed Jack. "What do you say, Professor Hertz?"

The elderly German hesitated a moment, thinking.

"We are a long way from Venus," he said, "and we know nothing of this craft. First we must learn about it and understand the mechanism—the driving force. What sends you hurtling into space?" he asked Pritexa. "Is it the blue fire?"

The Venusian shook his head and answered:

"The blue fire is but a manifestation, like the sparks from your electrical machines. The sparks

are not the power—they but show the power to be working. So it is with our blue fire."

"Then what is the power?" asked the professor.

"You shall see," was the reply. "Come now, and I will show you about our craft and the engine room."

They were about to quit the cabin when Gozona returned. She conversed for a few moments with her cousin and Soli in their own language and then said in English to the visitors:

"Jantu is somewhat better, cheered by the news I have brought him that we shall all soon be back on our beloved Venus. It was, perhaps, a mistake for us to come to the earth. But I am not sorry, for it has enabled me to meet you, my friends," and she bowed graciously and smiled warmly at Mark, Jack, and Professor Hertz.

That was the worst of it, Jack and Mark secretly thought. She was as gracious to the aged German as to the younger men, and they were both, in a manner, losing their hearts to beautiful Gozona.

"Now, if you will excuse me," went on Gozona, "I will lie down and get a little rest. For I am tired from my earth journey. On Venus I could, by a thought carriage, go from place to place with no exertion. But I need some rest on earth."

"I should say you would, after that trip through the storm!" exclaimed Jack.

"Meanwhile my friends will show you over the ship and you can tell how long it will be before we start back for our planet," went on the fair visitor from Venus, smiling graciously.

"There she goes again," said Mark, as Gozona left the cabin. "She simply takes it all for granted."

"We can't disappoint her now," suggested Jack. "After all, this projectile craft isn't very different from the machine in which we shot to the City Beyond the Clouds. And if we can't repair this ship, maybe we can all go in the *Asteroid* when we help the professor finish her, which ought to be soon."

"The *Asteroid* could never reach Venus," declared Mark. "If we go at all we'll have to use the *Red Dwarf,*" and he mentioned the craft in which they had gone to the City Beyond the Clouds and returned with the professor's son and daughter. The name *Red Dwarf* had been bestowed on it after the defeat of those diminutive demons. "Or else," he went on, "we'll have to use one of these blue streaks."

"Ha, that isn't a bad name!" exclaimed Jack. "If we get this craft to go I vote we name it the *Blue Streak!*"

"Suits me," murmured Mark. "But let's get a

look at the jigger before we decide anything."

In the glimpse they had of the craft from the outside, by that great flash of lightning, the visitors had seen the projectile lying on its longer axis, with the pointed end slightly raised on a small hill. This position, similar to that assumed by a projectile fired from a cannon, seemed to be the one which it was intended the *Blue Streak* should assume, for the state rooms and other compartments were laid out longitudinally rather than transversely.

Following Soli and Pritexa out of the main cabin, the three visitors found themselves in a corridor from which opened small rooms, evidently sleeping quarters for the crew and passengers. Two of these doors were closed, and Mark and Jack guessed that behind one Gozona was resting while back of the other was the wounded Jantu.

Beyond the living quarters was another small cabin, evidently a chart, or navigating, room, for there were many strange instruments, dials, and gauges on the side walls. There were also ports covered with heavy, blue glass.

"Now we come to the engine room," said Pritexa, indicating a door leading into a passage. "I must beg you to be careful in there. Our power machines are not like those to which you are accustomed."

"We'll watch our step all right," said Jack, but this slang was lost on the Venusian. He and Soli were about to precede the visitors into the power department of the *Blue Streak* when a call came from the corridor off which opened the sleeping rooms.

"Jantu!" exclaimed the two Venusians in a breath and, talking excitedly in their own language, they ran toward the nearest of the closed doors.

"Hope he isn't going to die," murmured Jack Darrow.

While waiting the return of their hosts, Jack stepped over to examine some of the instruments on the walls of the chart room, Professor Hertz did the same, and Mark started into the corridor leading to the engine room, the door of which Pritexa had opened just before the call for help resounded.

Forgetting for the moment the warning that had been given, Mark Sampson advanced into the corridor, which was short. Three steps brought him to the control, or operating, room, where the maze of machinery and its strange construction filled him with astonishment.

Some of the apparatus was like that of the various craft in which he and his chum had traveled either with Professor Henderson or with Gustavus Hertz. But other engines, dynamos,

motors, and tubes were so strange that Mark could only guess at their object.

The center of the room was filled by a machine. At the sight Mark's eyes opened wide, for he saw its yellow gleam. Hardly able to believe the evidence of his senses, he stepped closer and at once he found himself in the unseen grip of some terrible force. It was as though his every sense was controlled by an irresistible power. He was being drawn toward this mysterious machine—drawn in spite of his effort to hold back. He gave a despairing cry. Fortunately he retained the use of his voice.

"Help! Help!" he ejaculated hoarsely.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack, from the chart room.

"The engine of gold! It's drawing me into its wheels! They're beginning to move! I can't stop myself! Help! Help!"

Mark's voice died away.

CHAPTER IX

THE AIR EXPRESS

SPRINGING away from their contemplation of the strange instruments, Jack Darrow and Professor Hertz rushed to the aid of Mark. They had a view of him being slowly pulled, by some invisible force, into the now whirring wheels of an engine which gleamed yellow in the light of the lamps, and the yellowness was the mellow richness of gold.

Jack and the professor could see poor Mark using all his strength against the unseen force that was dragging him to his death, for that he would meet death, once he became involved in those swiftly moving wheels of gold, could not be doubted.

"Brace back, Mark! Brace back!" cried Jack. "We'll save you!"

"Don't go any nearer!" shouted the German.

"I—I can't help myself!" was Mark's despairing answer. "I have lost all my power to resist."

In another moment Jack and the professor would have been in the engine room and exposed

to the same danger as that which now threatened to envelop Mark. But Pritexa came running down the corridor. He cried out something in his own tongue and then quickly added in English to Jack and the professor:

"Back! Back, for your lives!"

"But we must save Mark!" cried Jack.

"I will save him! You know not the power of our engine of gold!" exclaimed the Venusian.

He touched a lever on the wall outside the control room and instantly the golden machine stopped. Then Mark Sampson fell down in a limp heap on the floor.

"He's dead!" cried Jack.

"No," said Pritexa, "it is just a natural collapse after being subjected to the terrific force of the machine. I warned him not to go in, even though I thought the power was off. It must have been turned on without my knowledge. But no harm is done, fortunately. Your friend is, even now, reviving."

It was true. Mark opened his eyes and managed to get to his feet, aided by the Venusian. Jack and the professor did not dare venture into the room, though Pritexa said:

"There is no danger now. The power is off," and he led Mark to the outer corridor.

"Whew," murmured the rescued one, "that was a close call!"

"I don't see how you dare run that engine to navigate your craft if it's as dangerous as all that," said Jack, when Mark had somewhat recovered his poise.

"We would not dare without wearing protecting masks," was the Venusian's reply. "Without my mask I would not have dared venture into the engine room until I had shut off the golden engine. But, as you saw, I stopped it from without."

"But," said Professor Hertz, "if this engine was going I don't see why your craft didn't move, at least a little way. But it hasn't. It has been as stationary as a rock."

"The engine of gold is only part of our motive power," was the answer. "One of its functions is to negative the gravity of the earth and also that of Venus. For we have the attraction of gravition there, else we would not be able to cling to our planet any more than you could to yours. But to send our craft through space, when gravity is made negative, we use another power, which I will tell you about later. Are you feeling better?" he asked Mark.

"Oh, yes! I've quite recovered. But it was a terrible sensation, being drawn into that engine. Is it really gold?" he asked.

"Solid gold," said a voice behind them and, turning, they saw the beautiful girl in blue smiling at them.

"You didn't rest long," remarked Jack.

"No," said Gozona, "we Venusians require but little rest to recuperate our powers. This is because a few drops of Bitam revives our failing energies and a little breathing of Gasto is as though we had eaten heartily, as you regard eating," and she laughed a little.

"But an engine of solid gold!" went on Mark. "It doesn't seem possible," for the machine was not a small one.

"I should think you would find gold too soft to use in a machine where strength and friction are factors," said the professor.

"We have means to temper gold," replied Gozona.

They told her of Mark's danger and she looked worried.

"It is best that you do nothing and venture to no part of our ship until you understand all about it," she said earnestly. "I pray you to be careful!"

"I will, after this," promised Mark, with a grim smile.

Pritexa took the visitors over the ship, showing them, first of all, how to control the engine of gold and, later, the mechanism by which the craft flew through space. This was the worst damaged of all the apparatus. But a visit to the other craft showed the propelling engine of that

to be in good shape, though almost everything else was broken.

"Do you understand how this works?" asked Mark of the professor, after they had listened intently to the explanations of Pritexa.

"To some degree," was the answer. "It is on the rocket principle, and the force is generated by some chemical inserted in that big tank near the engine of gold. Just what this form of power is Pritexa did not reveal. He says he will later."

"I imagine it is a concentrated and very strong gas, generated from chemicals, and that this gas, rushing out of the flat end of the *Blue Streak,* as the gases from burning powder rush out of the base of a rocket, causes the projectile to move forward," said Mark slowly.

"Yes, that is the general principle," agreed Professor Hertz.

"Do you think we can make repairs, building up one good airship from the wreck of the two?" asked Jack.

"We can tell better to-morrow," answered the professor. "We must look them over by daylight. It is possible the shell of the one we are now in is badly cracked by the fall to earth."

A little later the visitors took their departure, promising to return the next day and go over everything carefully. The Gypsies had left the

vicinity, and as the two projectiles from Venus had fallen in a lonely and inaccessible part of the mountains, there was little likelihood that any curious crowds would visit the place.

The storm was over, and though the trip back by auto was not easy the three made it before morning and went to bed, their minds filled with many new thoughts.

Early the next morning Professor Hertz and his two young assistants, taking Professor Henderson with them, again went out to the place where the two machines were stranded.

"I'll give you the benefit of my advice about repairing them," said Professor Henderson. "But you needn't expect me to make the trip to Venus with you. I'm getting too old. All I want to do is to sit around and help Washington White gather his eggs."

"All right," assented Jack. "Just help us get the *Blue Streak* repaired and then we'll take the air express for Venus!"

"Air express will be a good name for it, if we can get it to go," laughed Mark.

They found by daylight a better road than the one they had taken in the storm and darkness, and they soon reached the place. They were gratified to find that no unwelcome visitors had been to it and they were warmly welcomed by Gozona and her friends.

"How is Jantu?" asked Mark, not that he cared much, but it made some conversation.

"He is slowly mending," answered the beautiful girl in blue, for she never wore any other color. "I think by the time you have our repairs made he will be able to go back to Venus with us."

"We'll do our best," promised Jack.

Professor Henderson marveled, no less than did his friends, at the perfection of the machinery in the *Blue Streak*. The engine of gold, he said, was the most powerful, considering its weight, of any motor ever devised.

"If we could adapt that to the ordinary dirigible balloon type or aeroplane craft it would revolutionize flying," said the aged man.

The inspection of the *Blue Streak* and of the other damaged craft from Venus was quickly but thoroughly done by the two scientists, aided by Mark and Jack. Then the two older inventors went into consultation and a little later announced their decision to the anxious Venusians and the no less eager Jack and Mark. For the two young men were now eager to make the trip in company with the beautiful and fascinating Gozona.

"Yes," said Professor Hertz, who had tentatively agreed to make the trip to the distant planet with the two younger inventors and those who wished to return to their native land, "it will be possible, I think, to repair the *Blue Streak*.

Whether we can succeed in getting it far enough away from the earth to have the force of gravitation made negative is a question."

"The gold engine will take care of that," said Pritexa.

"Well, the only other question is the ability of your propelling mechanism to send us through space fast enough. We must make the journey quickly," said the professor. "I have in mind our own food supply," he went on. "We cannot carry any great quantity of provisions, and our trip up, our stay on Venus, and our trip back must be a hurried one."

"I realize that," said Pritexa. "But you need have no fears on the score of speed. Light is the only element that can beat us."

"Then," said Professor Henderson, "we might as well start. I mean on the repairs," he added, as he saw the look of joy on the face of Gozona.

"Hadn't we better take the *Blue Streak* to our shops and make the repairs there?" asked Jack.

"I think it would be better," replied Professor Hertz, "to do the repair work here. Then we can take off from this isolated spot with much more freedom than from your plant. Every other time we have left the earth on one of our trips we have been bothered by curiosity seekers and the newspaper reporters and photographers. I should like, this time, to leave in secret."

"But," objected Mark, "how can we make repairs out in this wilderness on the mountain side?"

"When Mahomet found he could not bring the mountain to him, he went to the mountain," Professor Henderson said, with a chuckle. "We can bring some of our tools and machinery out here and set up a temporary shop. We can put up a fence around the *Blue Streak* and post guards. In that way we shall not be bothered."

Thus it was done. Work of erecting the fence started the next day, trusted men from the shops being engaged and on them strict silence enjoined concerning the nature of the task to be undertaken. In a short time, when any chance observation was barred, actual operations on reconstructing the air express were begun.

Materials and machinery were transported to the enclosure and under the direction of the two older men and the two young scientists the less damaged *Blue Streak* was repaired from parts of the other. The location of the work enclosure being off the main highway, there was little trouble from curious ones, now that the Gypsy caravan had departed.

Naturally something leaked out about Mark, Jack, and the two scientists being engaged on something new, and there were some speculative items in the papers concerning where the daring

adventurers would next head for. Previous voyages to Mars, the moon and to the City Beyond the Clouds had furnished the papers with good stories. So now the editors and reporters were on the alert for something else.

But the secret was well kept, and as the Venusians did not venture from the enclosure, their presence was unsuspected. The work of repairing the *Blue Streak* progressed rapidly. As the machinery and instruments of navigation through millions of miles of space were put in shape with the aid of Soli and Pritexa, the beautiful girl in blue helping now and then, it was evident that the journey could soon be made.

"When do you think we can start, Professor?" asked Mark of the German one day, since it had definitely been decided that the two young men and Gustavus Hertz would go with the four Venusians to the distant planet.

"We could go almost any time now," was the answer. "However, I would like to make a trial flight of the *Blue Streak* before we undertake the actual voyage."

"It might be safer," agreed Jack; "especially as we don't know as much about this airship as we do about our own machines."

They were still considering a trial flight when unexpectedly all chances of it were cast aside. The finishing touches had just been put on the

repaired projectile and its machinery when Gozona appeared in the temporary workshop where the earth people were gathered, her manner showing great excitement.

"We must leave at once!" she exclaimed. "There is no time to lose! You tell me the ship is ready! Then we must fly!"

"What's the hurry?" asked Jack.

"I—I cannot tell you!" she murmured, and turned aside. "But we must leave at once—by to-night at the very latest!"

"Whew!" whistled Mark as the girl sped back to the temporary cabin where living quarters had been constructed for her and her companions. "I wonder what's up. She wasn't in such a rush yesterday."

"Maybe she has had a message from Venus, saying that if they don't soon return they'll be kept out forever," suggested Jack.

"We'll have to find out," declared Mark.

CHAPTER X

OFF TO VENUS

FOR a few minutes after the hurried departure of Gozona in such a perturbed state, Jack Darrow, Mark Sampson, and the two older scientists said little. They were disturbed and worried. The girl from Venus had startled them by her sudden eagerness to be off, whereas, up to this time, no such urgent need for haste had been manifest.

"Well, there's one thing about it," said Jack, as he laid aside a wrench he had been using to make some final adjustments, "we've got the machine in almost as good shape as she was when she came from Venus."

"That's right," agreed his chum. "You'd hardly know she'd ever been in a smash-up."

"You have done good work," agreed Professor Hertz. "Very good."

"Can't tell until we try her," said Mark, and Professor Hertz added:

"I think everything is all right. Pritexa has

gone over the repaired machinery carefully and he says it is as good as new."

"Well, he's the one who ought to know," commented Jack. "So if we're ready, why not hop off?"

"To-night, as Gozona asked us?" inquired Mark.

"Sure! Why not? It won't take us long to pack and we can easily get together what food we'll need. We can't make an extended stay at best, on account of the food supply," Jack went on.

"Unless we find things growing on Venus that we can eat," suggested his chum. "That's possible, you know. That these Venusians drink Bitam and sniff Gasto is no sign that there aren't fruits and vegetables growing up there that we can live on."

"Aren't you coming with us, Professor Henderson?" Jack asked.

"No, thank you. But there is really no reason why you should not start at once. Everything is in readiness."

"I'd like to find out, though," said Mark, "why Gozona was in such a rush. I think I'll see if I can find out." He started for the temporary living quarters of the Venusians.

"I'll come with you!" offered Jack quickly.

The two professors smiled as the young men left them and Mr. Hertz remarked:

"A little jealousy there."

"It's natural," admitted his colleague. "Gozona is a very beautiful young lady. I only hope the feelings she has engendered in the hearts of Mark and Jack have no ill effects."

"Ill effects! What do you mean?"

"Well, she is a creature from another planet. She has her own notions of life and her way of living. She has her own companions, and I fancy that cousin of hers regards her with more than a merely relative interest.

"He seems very fond of her, and whenever Mark or Jack has shown Gozona any little attention I have caught looks on the face of Pritexa that I did not altogether like."

"Perhaps we had better warn our young assistants."

"A word to them not to be too eager might not come amiss," was Professor Henderson's answer.

"Well, if I am going with them, and I suppose I am since you will not make the journey," said the German, "I will advise them as best I can. But it might be well to check up on the calculations we have already made regarding Venus and the position of that planet by dark to-night. Does she then reach her maximum of inferiority conjunction?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Henderson, referring to

some papers covered with figures and abstruse calculations.

"It is most fortunate! Then to-night will be the ideal time for starting in the *Blue Streak.*"

"Exactly! It may be that Gozona knows this and that may be her reason for urging us to hasten. However, here are my calculations. Perhaps you had better check them."

The two men then went over figures which showed the exact position and orbit of Venus. They had computed the mean daily motion, the sidereal revolution in days, and the eccentricity of orbit.

"This figure of the planet's inclination of orbit to the ecliptic is seven naught eleven point seven. Is that correct?" asked Professor Hertz of his colleague, after looking carefully at a table of figures.

"That is correct," Mr. Henderson stated.

"I wasn't sure whether that last was a seven or a nine," went on his friend. "What do you make the orbital velocity in miles per second?"

"Twenty-one point seventy-five."

"Taking the earth's as eighteen point fifty, I agree with you," said Professor Hertz.

The two then checked over their figures by which they had computed the mean longitudinal distance at the epoch of Venus, the same distance

at the perihelion, the annual sidereal motion, both plus and minus, and the mean longitude of the ascending node.

"It will be most interesting to visit Venus," said Professor Hertz, as they came to an agreement regarding these important calculations. "There are several questions to be settled regarding that planet."

"Especially the one which has so long puzzled astronomers, whether or not the planet has a satellite," said his companion. "The length of the day there, too, is in doubt. In 1667 Cassini computed that Venus had a day of twenty-three hours, but in 1726 Bianchini, with the aid of better instruments, decided that the day on Venus was equal to twenty-four of our days."

"A long working period," chuckled Professor Hertz. "Though, as I recall it, some authorities held that the computations of Bianchini could be reconciled with those of Cassini on the assumption that as Bianchini observed Venus night after night, it had made one revolution and a little more. J. H. Schroeter found a revolution of less than twenty-four hours, but Sir W. Herschel, as in the case with Mercury, was never able to detect any changes by which a period of rotation could be determined."

Mark and Jack came hurrying back from their visit to the shack where the girl in blue and her

companions lived while the repairs were being made on the *Blue Streak*.

"We've got to hop off at once—by dark at the latest!" exclaimed Mark.

"So we'd better get busy!" added his chum.

"Why?" asked the German.

"It's Jantu," answered Mark. "He's in a bad way and needs some kind of stuff other than Bitam and Gasto, so Gozona says. She is afraid he may die before he can be gotten back to Venus. Once there, though, he will recover, she says."

"What seems to be the matter with him?" asked Professor Henderson. "I know a little about medicine—"

"She won't let us see him," interrupted Jack. "In fact, we haven't set eyes on him since we got into this business. He was kept in his own stateroom while they lived on the damaged *Blue Streak,* and when they moved out, so we could work on her, Jantu was transferred to the shack one night when we weren't present. So we've never seen him."

"There seems to be some mystery about him," added Mark. "Gozona is evidently much worried. That is why she begged us to make haste. As there is no reason why we can't, I urge that we hop off to-night."

"It can be done," agreed Professor Hertz. "I can soon make my adieus to Berta and Max.

You young gentlemen can see to the storing of sufficient food for, say, a month's absence. By night we should be able to leave the earth, provided the engine of gold and the other machines of the *Blue Streak* do what Pritexa says they will do."

The workmen were dismissed with renewed stipulations about keeping the matter secret until after the *Blue Streak* had left the earth. Then Mark and Jack went off to buy provisions.

Professor Hertz left to bid farewell to his daughter and his son while Professor Henderson went over some final calculations and inspected the machinery and instruments in company with Pritexa and Soli to make sure nothing had been forgotten. During this occupation Mr. Henderson noted Gozona going in and out of the shack several times. She seemed to be searching for flowers among the weeds that grew in the mountain enclosure where the air express had been repaired, and the scientist guessed that she was seeking some remedies for the afflicted man.

By dusk all was in readiness. The air express had been loaded with provisions and supplies sufficient for the three earth inhabitants who were to sojourn on Venus for a time, if all went well. As for the Venusians, they moved from their temporary shack such things as they had taken out of the *Blue Streak* while it was being repaired.

"All aboard!" said Jack, at last. "Are we ready?"

"Jantu is not yet with us," said Soli. "Pritexa and I will carry him to his stateroom. He is not able to walk."

A little later, borne on a litter and covered with a sheet, while Gozona walked beside him, Jantu was taken into the air express. Look as they did, without being too impertinent about it, the earth-born could catch no glimpse of the face of the injured man. They felt a strange suspicion, but tried to dismiss it.

"Now we are ready, I think," said Gozona, and she smiled at Mark and Jack and seemed somewhat relieved as she entered the main door of the *Blue Streak*. "But let us hasten, please! Much on it depends." In her pleasurable excitement at leaving for her own home, she had lapsed into her Germanic style for a moment.

Professor Henderson had come, with Washington White, to bid the adventurers a safe voyage.

"How far off am dish yeah plamet, Wemus?" asked the old colored man, as he helped Mark and Jack carry in their valises of personal belongings.

"About twenty-five million miles," answered the scientist.

"Good lan'! Dat suah am a long way!"

"Not as far as Mars," said Jack. "When we went there we covered nearly fifty million miles."

"Yes, I 'members 'bout dat!" said Washington. "But how long yo' figger yo's gwine to be on de road?"

"We hope to make it in three days," Mark answered. "If we can make an average speed of about three hundred and thirty-five thousand miles per hour we can do it."

"Dat's goin' pretty fas'," said Washington. "Hm, yes, sah!"

"Not any faster than when we went to Mars," said Jack. "And I think the *Blue Streak* is the best sort of air express to make the trip in. Once we get beyond the influence of the earth, we shall make fast time."

"Well," sighed Washington, "all I hopes is dat yo'-all doan make no mistakes! Good-by!" and somewhat overcome by his feelings, for he was a faithful soul and very fond of the young men, he shuffled outside the enclosure to wait for Professor Henderson to join him.

Final adjustments were made. Professor Henderson shook hands with his friends and bade farewell to Gozona, Pritexa and Soli. The main door was closed and clamped shut. The air express stood inclined on its side, the flat base clear to allow the gases to escape and its pointed end aimed at Venus, twenty-five million miles away;

aimed at a planet about the same size as our earth, but much nearer the sun.

"I'm afraid we're going to be pretty hot, once we get to Venus," Jack had remarked when talking it over with Mark. "We're ninety-two million miles from the sun, and you know how hot it gets in summer. You can figure what it's going to mean when we have only about sixty-seven million miles between us and that ball of fire, which is the distance we'll be from the sun when we get to Venus."

"Still," said Mark, "you know that all the observations show Venus to have a somewhat different atmosphere from that of our earth, so it may be the sun's rays will give forth no more heat there than they do here."

"Let's hope so," murmured Jack. "Else we'll have to wear asbestos suits."

"Gozona and her friends didn't speak of any exceptional heat," went on Mark; "so I guess it will be all right."

Now they were ready to try the great experiment. It was night. They were shut up within the projectile, or air express, a pointed cylinder composed of a peculiar metal, like nothing on earth, and containing strange and powerful machinery.

"Are you all ready?" called Pritexa, who was to be first in charge of the engines on the trip.

"All ready," answered Professor Hertz.

"It does not seem possible," murmured Gozona, "that at last we are really going back to my beloved Venus! So much has happened since we left there," she said to her cousin.

"Yes," he agreed. "But we have met some kind friends and are taking them back with us," and he smiled at Mark and Jack and nodded at the German.

"Indeed, without them we never would have been able to make our return," agreed the maiden in blue. "But you are forgetting something," she said quickly to her cousin, and she continued in the Venusian language.

"Oh, yes, the masks!" said Pritexa quickly. "It will be necessary for all of us, you included," and he nodded to the three earth dwellers, "to cover our faces when making the start. Certain noxious gases are generated by our machinery at the beginning, when passing through the atmosphere of your earth, and they would be deadly without masks, which we have. It will be necessary to wear them only a short time. Beyond the atmosphere, and in the ether, there is no danger."

"I will get them," offered Gozona.

She was absent a few moments and returned with some queer contrivances, somewhat like the gas masks worn by soldiers in the Great War.

The masks were quickly donned and then, after

a last inspection of the machinery, Pritexa gave warning that he was about to start the engine of gold.

Jack and Mark looked from a thick, glass port and in the weird light that shone from the *Blue Streak* they beheld Professor Henderson and Washington White standing at the far side of the enclosure, waiting for the take-off.

"I wonder when we'll see them again," murmured Jack, lifting his mask for a moment.

"Who can tell?" murmured Mark.

Many and terrible happenings were to take place before the travelers again set foot on earth. But they did not know about them, which was, perhaps, just as well.

"Mask!" suddenly cried Pritexa. "We are going to start!"

Jack and Mark stood alert and ready, having certain levers to pull and switches to set at a signal from the Venusian engineer. Professor Hertz, likewise, had certain duties to perform.

There was a clicking sound and at once the air outside the projectile express was filled with more of that curious, blue light. A loud spluttering followed, as if a million static electric machines were operating at once. Jack caught the signal from Pritexa and pulled the lever in front of him. A red light glowed on the side wall.

A moment later Mark got his signal and shifted

a handle. An orange glow played about him and, for a moment, he was afraid. But nothing happened. From a gong overhead three sharp clangs ran out. This was the signal for Professor Hertz to close a contact switch of which he had charge.

The spluttering, snapping sounds increased. The *Blue Streak* trembled and vibrated. She seemed trying to pull herself away from contact with the earth.

Could she do it? Would the air express rise?

These were the questions Mark Sampson and Jack Darrow were anxiously asking themselves beneath their protecting masks. They had a glimpse of the maiden in blue, also in a mask, watching them from the door of the motor room.

A moment later there was a terrific explosion, seemingly outside, and, for a moment, the young men feared that everything was going to pieces. But an instant later they felt a swaying motion and knew they had left the ground.

They were soon flying through space at terrific speed, headed for Venus.

CHAPTER XI

BLASTS OF ETHER

For several tense moments, a space of time that seemed longer than it really was, Mark Sampson, Jack Darrow, and Professor Gustavus Hertz stood at their posts, their masks covering their faces, intently watching Pritexa and Soli, who were close to the engine of gold. Its deadly drawing power had been neutralized now that it was functioning to help send the *Blue Streak* through space.

Suddenly the Venusian engineer, who had been closely observing a clock gauge, pushed forward a lever. There was a further vibration of the air express, and Mark and Jack wondered what was going to happen. But all that occurred was that Pritexa removed his mask and motioned to the others to do the same. Since their entire heads were covered, they could not hear his voice.

"Well, that's a relief!" exclaimed Jack, as he laid aside the grotesque protector.

"I should say so!" agreed his chum.

"It was not exactly pleasant," admitted Professor Hertz as he laid aside his head covering. "But I suppose it was necessary."

"Very necessary," stated Pritexa. "Without them, as we passed through the atmosphere of your earth, we should all have been killed. But there is no more danger."

"How about it when we strike the atmosphere of Venus?" asked Jack. "Shall we have to put on the masks again?"

The chief engineer shook his head in negation.

"Our atmosphere is not like yours," he said. "However, have no fears," he added quickly, as he saw what was engendered in the minds of the others. "You will be able to breathe it even as we breathed yours. The atmosphere of Venus lacks certain elements which the earth air has and which, in conjunction with the emanations from our propelling gas, mean danger on your planet."

"Then am I right in assuming that this *Blue Streak* is propelled by the issuance of exploding gas, just as is a rocket?" asked the German scientist eagerly. For, up to now, the exact method of sending the air express through space had been a jealously guarded secret from the earth dwellers, notwithstanding that they had worked on the machinery, including the engine of gold.

"It operates on the rocket principle," admitted

Pritexa, "but in a much more powerful fashion than any machine you have ever seen."

In one way this trip was no novelty to the three earth passengers, since they had several times sailed through immense spaces in a machine somewhat similar to the *Blue Streak*.

But it was their hope and expectation that on Venus they would encounter beings new and strange to them and that they would have some novel experiences. Professor Hertz hoped to be able to make some valuable scientific observations and to settle long disputed questions regarding the planet.

Having set the machinery to produce the maximum speed of their air express and also having adjusted the guiding compass so that it would keep the great projectile pointed for Venus, Pritexa stated that no further attention need be paid to the apparatus unless something unforeseen should occur.

"So you may wander about as you please," he told Professor Hertz and the two young scientists. "Jantu you will, of course, not disturb," he added gravely.

"Is he in bad shape?" asked Jack.

"He will be all right once we get to Venus," was the answer. "But meanwhile he is best left alone."

There seemed to the young men to be some-

thing that Pritexa was keeping back. However, what he said next occupied Jack and Mark to the exclusion of worrisome thoughts, at least for a time.

"You earth dwellers," went on the Venusian with a smile, "will, naturally, want to eat the earth food you have brought with you. You may make your own cooking and meal arrangements. As for my companions and me, we drink only Bitam and for food smell Gasto. It saves much time," he suggested.

"Indeed it does," agreed Professor Hertz. "I have often felt how foolish it is to spend so many hours preparing food which is disposed of in so short a time at the table. Your way seems much better, my friend Pritexa. Though I cannot deny," he added with a smile, "that I like my food!"

"Same here!" echoed Jack.

Mark wondered if it did not take time to distill the Gasto from flowers, though all he said aloud was:

"When we get to Venus we may do as the Venusians do."

"I fear it will take more than a brief stay on our planet to enable you to live on Bitam and Gasto," said Gozona, with a smile as she approached the group in the engine room. "But I hope you will stay with us a long time," she added genially.

"Is there any food there we can eat?" asked Jack, and the same thought was in Mark's mind as was in his—that he would not object to living on Venus the rest of his life if he could have the companionship of Gozona.

"From what I have observed of you while we were on your earth," said the girl in blue, "I should say that you might be able to exist on Venus as you do on your own planet. But that remains to be seen. We are still a long way off."

"But we're getting there!" exclaimed Jack, looking at a speed gauge and observing that they were exceeding 345,000 miles per hour. But in the solid air express, breathing the same atmosphere as that of the earth, the air being distilled from certain chemicals on board, they were hardly sensible of their motion, so smooth was it.

The *Blue Streak* was not like an airship as ordinarily constructed. It was more like the machines in which Mark and Jack had visited the moon and Mars, as well as the City Beyond the Clouds. And so straight and swift did it progress that it was like riding inside a bullet. There were no air pockets or bumps to shake up and disconcert the travelers.

"We certainly got off to a blaze of fireworks!" chuckled Jack, as they left the engine room for the more comfortable living room, or main cabin. "I wonder if we broke up any more radio sets?"

"Very likely we did, for which I am sorry," said Pritexa, who had been told about the rather startling phenomena that had followed the first appearance of the blue fire above the earth. "It is one of the manifestations of our power that we have not yet been able to control," he added. "We know about radio. Those we have on Venus are much nearer perfection than yours. Soli and Jantu tried to signal by means of the radio when they were moving to and fro trying to find Gozona and me," he went on.

"That must have been the queer language Professor Henderson heard before his radio blew up," observed Mark.

"I, also, heard it," said Professor Hertz.

"Is the radio on the *Blue Streak* working?" asked Mark eagerly.

"Oh, yes," was the answer. "You may tune in your earth, if you wish. Perhaps I had better get some station for you. Is there any particular one you would like to hear?"

"Get PXYD," suggested Jack. "That's the biggest one near our home."

"Maybe they'll be broadcasting something about the sensation we must have created when we left our planet!" chuckled Mark.

When the loud speaker at last picked up and greatly magnified the wireless signals from earth, all on board listened to an excited broadcaster

telling of a phenomenon that had just occurred. It was the launching of the *Blue Streak,* but of course the announcer did not know this.

"There has occurred within the last hour," said the broadcaster in station PXYD, "a most startling series of events. In the mountains north of here there was observed that same queer blue light in the sky which was first noted several weeks ago and which was followed by the destruction of, or damage to, a large number of radio sets. For a time after that, as will be recalled, the blue light disappeared. Now it has been observed again, but the comet, meteor, or whatever it was that caused the manifestation, appeared to be going away from the earth instead of coming toward it."

"He's right there!" chuckled Jack.

"Sure is," agreed Mark.

"Station PXYD is one of the few not damaged by this queer blue light," the announcer went on. "In consequence, we are able to broadcast this news. We are constantly getting reports of stations all about us, as well as private sets, having been destroyed or greatly damaged by this queer, blue fire. As soon as we get further information announcements will be made. Meanwhile, we shall go on with our regular program. The Uburb Comedy Four will now entertain you with music and songs."

"Tune them out! They're terrible!" exclaimed Mark.

Pritexa shut off the radio and, turning to his guests, said, with a smile:

"You have heard how it was. Our departure from the earth must have caused a sensation."

"Yes," agreed Professor Hertz. "Especially as few outside of our own working force had any inkling of what caused the phenomena they had witnessed. I should like to read the papers."

"We shall not trouble them again," said Pritexa with a smile. "For I think we have had enough of the earth. Have we not?" he asked his cousin, with a smile.

"Yes," she answered. "I never want to go back there. I was much disappointed in that planet. But not wholly in the inhabitants of it!" she added quickly, and with a warm smile toward Mark, Jack and the older scientist. "Without you we should all have perished. But when Pritexa and I first formed the design of going to your earth we hoped we might find blue water even better than our own, and flowers and herbs from which we might distill a perfume that would prolong life beyond the span we have on Venus, which is longer than yours," she said. "But we were disappointed, and with that and the accident we suffered and our treatment by the Gypsies, earth is not a happy memory for us. Though we

are very grateful to you," she said, bowing prettily.

"We hope we shall like Venus more than you liked our earth," Mark said.

They were being propelled through a vast, dark space. But the air express was well lighted within by means of tubes of curious, glowing gas, which hung from the ceiling of the different compartments. Mark and Jack were getting something to eat from the food they had brought with them when suddenly a pale glow seemed to spread throughout the *Blue Streak*. For a moment they could not imagine what it was but an instant later Professor Hertz exclaimed:

"It is the sun! We have passed beyond the shadow of the earth and from now on shall be in perpetual sunshine."

"Sure enough!" agreed Jack.

"That is until we reach Venus," went on the scientist. "Then, if that planet revolves as does ours, we shall have night and day again."

"Venus is much like your earth in that respect," said Pritexa, and for the first time the German-American realized that he and Professor Henderson might have settled some of the vexed questions by making inquiries of Pritexa before the *Blue Streak* had left the earth. But it was too late now to acquaint Professor Henderson with the truth.

"I'll tell him when I get back," decided Gustavus Hertz to himself. "That is, if I ever do get back."

The internal lights of the *Blue Streak* were now dimmed, except those in dark corners of the engine room, and the two young scientists and their German-American friend ate their first meal on board —a sort of early breakfast—while the Venusians partook of their blue water and smelled the volatile Gasto.

Suddenly, just as they finished their meal, Jack and his companions experienced a curious lurching of the air express. It seemed to swerve to one side.

"What's the matter?" asked Mark.

"Ether blasts!" answered Pritexa, hurrying toward the engine room. "We are in the path of a terrible force! I was afraid of this!" He went on and then he talked excitedly to Soli, who hurried with him to the control room.

Meanwhile, the *Blue Streak* was whirling about strangely.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE ATTACK

"COME! You must help us!" said Pritexa to the earth dwellers, as he hurried from the main cabin. "We are in great danger!"

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"Tell us what to do and we'll help!" added Mark.

He and Jack saw Gozona hastening toward the room in which they knew the injured Jantu was lying. They had not yet set eyes on him. Even when his door had been open, as they passed his cabin, they could not get a glimpse of him, for there was a screen in front of the door.

"It is a terrific wind that is blowing us off our course!" explained Pritexa as he rushed into the engine room. "If we are forced too far to one side we shall never reach Venus!"

"Where shall we get to?" asked Mark.

"Unless we can get out of the influence of this wind we shall be whirled about in its stream forever," answered the Venusian.

"Whew!" whistled Jack. "A modern Flying

Dutchman, one might say. This sounds bad!"

"How can there be a wind when we are beyond the earth's atmosphere, and, as is well known, wind is nothing but air in motion?" asked Professor Hertz.

"Wind, as you know it, is air in motion," agreed the captain of the *Blue Streak* as he rapidly turned wheels and dials in the engine room. "But in the vastness of the space of the solar system there are 'ether blasts,' as we call them, which, while they are not winds as you know them, are yet fully as terrible and destructive. As nearly as our scientists can determine, it is a form of swiftly moving vacuum."

"That's as bad as a big wind," agreed Mark. "But what can we do?"

"We must increase our speed and get out of the path of the ether blast," was the answer. "Whether or not we can do that remains to be seen. The engine is running at almost full power now. If I force it too much, danger mav result. But we must try."

He was changing several machines and pieces of mechanism, but, as yet, with no result. Soli was doing the same, but the *Blue Streak* was still in the grip of that terrible, unseen power, coming whence no one knew, going whither no one could guess.

"I had better tell you more about our source

of power," went on Pritexa, beckoning Mark and the other two earth inhabitants to come nearer to the engine of gold over which he was leaning. "The time may come when you will have to take charge."

"Why would that be?" asked Mark.

"Something may happen to Soli or to me," was the reply. "Poor Jantu will not be able to help. You may have to depend on yourselves if I should be disabled or if anything should happen to Soli. So I will show you how to regulate your speed and how to start and stop the mechanism. You know enough about navigation, for you have been to Mars and to the moon."

"Yes, I think we can navigate space all right," agreed Mark.

"And it's about time we knew how to run the *Blue Streak,*" added Jack, "for if you folks aren't coming back to earth in her we'll have to drive it ourselves."

"Oh, are you going to return to earth in this?" asked Pritexa, and his voice and manner showed surprise as he looked at the three earth dwellers curiously.

"Why, of course, we're going back to earth in this, or in some machine like it," answered Mark.

"Gozona promised us that," stated Professor Hertz.

"Oh, did she?" asked Pritexa. "I didn't know.

Well, doubtless she will keep her word," he went on as he turned aside.

This impressed the three travelers as being rather curious and they had a moment or two of uneasiness. But the *Blue Streak* then began tumbling about in such a queer way, swaying, plunging, careening and almost turning over at times, that they were in desperate straits.

"We've got to do something!" cried Jack.

"There is only one thing to do—increase our speed!" repeated Pritexa. "It is done in this manner," he went on. "By increasing the quantity of this substance that is fed into the engine. That is the fuel," and he indicated a magazine of dark colored powder on top of the engine of gold.

"This gives more speed," he said, pointing to a lever, "and this less," and he showed the earth travelers a second handle. "But beyond this point it is dangerous to drive the engine." He indicated a mark on the scaled segment of the speed lever. "I am now going to use our utmost force," he added. "If it does not pull us out of the grip of the ether blast we are doomed!"

He opened the valve that allowed some of the brown powder to sift into a hopper. At the same time he shoved the speed lever over to its limit. For a moment it was a question as to which would win, the powerful *Blue Streak* or the ether blast. For a few seconds the projectilelike airship swayed

back and forth. Then it slowly tilted forward and resumed what might be called a horizontal position though in space there is no horizon. But it was once more flying along on its long axis as it was designed to do after leaving the earth.

"We are saved!" murmured Pritexa. "The engine of gold has brought us free of the ether blast!"

Soli and Pritexa conversed for a moment in their own language and then the captain of the *Blue Streak,* Pritexa, reduced speed to save the engine from tearing itself apart.

"You may go back to the main cabin now," said Pritexa when he had signified that Jack and the others might leave the machines to which they had hurriedly been assigned when the emergency occurred. "I think we shall be all right now—at least for a time."

Soli left the control room and went to another part of the ship.

"So Gozona said you were to return to earth in this craft, did she?" asked Pritexa when he was left alone with the earth-born.

"Yes. Is there anything strange in that?" Jack inquired.

"We did not plan to remain forever on Venus," stated the professor.

"I did not know exactly what the plans were," murmured Pritexa, and he seemed in a strange

confusion. "But doubtless, if Gozona said so, it will be done. She is your friend."

"Sure!" murmured Mark. "We've got to get back to earth. Maybe she will come back with us," he suggested.

"Never!" exclaimed Pritexa, and he spoke with great force. "She must remain with us on Venus!"

Jack and Mark looked at each other. This bore out their first impression that Pritexa was in love with the beautiful maiden in blue. Well, he was not the only one.

With the *Blue Streak* again on an "even keel," if that term may be employed concerning such a strange craft, matters were now easier on board. The visitors were shown to their small, but well equipped, staterooms and, as they had been up all the night before, they decided to get some sleep.

"There will be no danger for at least another day," said Pritexa. "Should emergency arise, however, I will summon you."

So, in spite of their strange surroundings and the novel trip they were making, Professor Hertz and the two young men composed themselves to sleep.

Before retiring, Jack and Mark had drawn thick curtains over the glass of the ports in their little staterooms to shut out the glaring light.

Now, as Jack awakened, he saw that this cur-

tain had been pulled aside, though he did not remember doing it, and the light of the sun was streaming in on him as he lay in the berth.

The light of the sun revealed something else. This was the figure of a big man coming into the room—a man around whose head was bound a cloth stained red. Jack knew at once who the intruder was—Jantu, the injured Venusian!

"Hope you're feeling better," Jack said, thinking the man had gotten into his stateroom by mistake. "Glad to see you!"

With a snarl like that of a wild beast, the big man from Venus sprang toward Jack, his fingers working convulsively as though eager to be about the young man's throat. At the same time Jantu cried out something in his own language and then in English he muttered:

"You kill will I! Not to Venus you shall go with Gozona! Never! You kill will I!"

Then he attacked Jack fiercely.

CHAPTER XIII

YELLOW SNOW

For a few seconds Jack Darrow thought he was in the midst of a terrible and all too realistic dream.

But though for an instant he thought it might be some strange dream or phantasmagoria of his brain, caused by the excitement he had just experienced in leaving the earth, Jack soon realized that it was a real man with whom he had to deal. And a madman at that!

The light of madness blazed forth from the eyes of Jantu, if ever insanity was recognizable. Jack realized this as he rolled to one side just in time to escape those clutching fingers which were ready to grasp his throat.

"Get out of here! What's the matter with you?" yelled Jack, thinking by a voice of authority he might turn the fellow from his purpose. But Jantu was not that kind.

"You will I kill!" he yelled in a strange voice, and though he used the English words as Gozona had first used hers in the excitement of appealing

to Jack and Mark, it was evident that this member of the party from Venus was not as adept in the tongue of the earth dwellers as were his companions.

He sprang at Jack, and though the young man by fairly rolling out of his berth was able to escape the clutching hands for a moment, they closed on him a second later in the small room and the two came to deadly grips.

If Jack Darrow had the notion that he could toss Jantu aside, escape from him or perhaps bring the madman to his senses by a show of force, the young scientist soon discovered his error. It was evident that Jantu meant to put his dire threat into execution.

"He's getting the best of me!" thought Jack, as he felt the fingers about his throat. Once he tore them loose, but with desperate cunning the fellow feinted, causing Jack to lower his guard, and a moment later again had a deadly grip.

By this time Jack realized that he could not fight this madman alone, so in a hoarse voice, with what little breath he could force past his constricted throat, he gasped:

"Help! Help! Mark! Professor! He's killing me!"

Jack's voice, alone, smothered as it was by the choking he was undergoing, might not have sufficed to bring help. But in his seeming triumph

Jantu himself let out a wild yell, and this carried to the farthest part of the *Blue Streak*.

On hearing the yell, Pritexa, followed by Mark and the professor, rushed to Jack's stateroom.

In their excitement they blocked the doorway, so that no one could enter. However, they could see what was going on. They had a glimpse of the figure of Jantu, with his bloody bandage, bending over Jack, and glimpsed the latter's bulging eyes and scarlet face.

"Let me get at him! Call Soli!" cried Pritexa to Mark and the professor.

Realizing that he could do more than they could, they swung aside.

Pritexa flung himself on Jantu's back and fairly pulled him off Jack. But with a wild snarl of rage, Jantu pulled himself loose and again reached for the youth, now prostrate on his berth, quite exhausted.

Then Pritexa gave a remarkable exhibition of power. He swung Jantu about with one motion of his arm and then, extending the fingers of his two hands out, like so many thorns, held them in front of the madman's face. Mark and the professor were conscious of some weird flow of power from Pritexa's fingers into the body of the enraged man. They could see nothing, any more than one can observe the flow of hypnotic power, but it seemed to be something of that nature, for

in a few seconds the madman's clenched hands fell limply to his sides, his eyes lost their wild glare, and he whimpered like a naughty child. Then Pritexa spoke to him in that strange language of Venus.

Soli, summoned by Mark, came hastily up the corridor, and behind him was Gozona, much agitated.

"Did he harm any one?" she asked quickly. "Oh, poor Jack!" and she glided into the stateroom and placed one of her beautiful hands on the forehead of the limp youth. As she did so it seemed as though a spasm of rage thrilled Jantu. But Pritexa murmured a few words, stabbed his extended fingers at him, and the fellow limply subsided. At the same time Soli led him out into the corridor and Mark and the professor had a glimpse of Soli now making mesmeric passes over the head of the injured man.

His two companions had subdued Jantu by a strange exhibition of secret and unseen power. It was remarkable.

"Poor boy!" murmured Gozona, and Mark wished the thing had happened to him as he saw her solicitude. But Jack opened his eyes and murmured:

"I'm all right now. He choked me a little, but there's no harm done. I'm all right."

"I am so glad!" exclaimed the girl in blue.

"What set him off?" asked Mark. "How did it all happen, anyhow?"

"I woke up to find him in my stateroom," Jack said. "Gee, I must have slept late," he went on, seeing that all the others were fully dressed.

"We didn't call you," explained Mark. "We've all been up some time. It's hard to tell when it's night or morning with the sun always shining. But this occurrence is queer," he went on. "Does Jantu often get spells like that?"

"No, it is only since he was injured," explained Pritexa. "But have no fear. We will keep him locked in his room from now on."

"What set him against me?" asked Jack wonderingly. "I never did anything to him—never saw him before, as far as I know."

"That is true," admitted Pritexa in a low voice as Gozona went back to her room. "But he would have acted the same toward you or you," and, in turn, he indicated the professor and Mark.

"What's the reason?" Mark asked.

"He is what you call—it is hard to get the right word, but when one person likes another and does not want another to likewise have a fondness, it is——"

"Do you mean jealousy?" asked the professor.

"That is it! The Gypsies, from whom I learned what little English I have, were very what you call jealous. Jantu is the same."

"But of whom is Jantu jealous?" burst out Jack.

"You and your two friends," was the unexpected answer.

"Me?" cried Professor Hertz, with a hearty laugh. "Why, I'm an old man with grown-up children."

"It matters not," went on Pritexa. "Jantu so loves Gozona that he would be jealous even of a woman who loved her. We all on Venus love our beautiful young scientist," he went on. "For Gozona is one of our foremost astronomers. It was she who conceived the idea of going to the earth to learn more about it than our telescopes showed. We had long wondered whether or not it was inhabited. Now we know.

"Yes, we all love Gozona in Venus, but some more than others. Jantu was a suitor for her hand, even as I was," and he smiled a bit pathetically. "But she has vowed never to marry. She says she will devote her life to science. However, this did not prevent Jantu from loving her and I suppose he could not bear the little attention she gave to you people of the earth. If he had had his way he never would have permitted her to go to seek help of any on your planet. He would have been content to die, as we all would have had to do when Bitam and the Gasto gave out, had not Gozona insisted on finding you two

young men, of whom she heard through the Gypsies."

"I am glad she sought us out," said Mark.

"So am I," said Pritexa. "But Jantu is a very passionate man, and I think his injuries, sustained when he fell with the rescue ship, have turned his brain. He has had mild outbursts before, while you were at work repairing our ship. That is why we had to keep him secluded. Soli and I can control him by a hypnotic power we possess over him. That is why he has been kept in his room."

"But this morning we were careless and allowed the power to wane," went on Pritexa, "and I suppose he went on this mad rampage in consequence. But we will guard him well after this. I will put him into a deep hypnotic sleep that will last until we reach Venus."

"I hope you can," said Jack, with a smile, as he rubbed his throat. "Being waked up by a mad lover who wants to choke you to death isn't exactly pleasant."

"I am sorry," said Pritexa simply. "But you will be in no more danger."

The excitement caused by the sudden attack on Jack soon passed, and nothing more was seen of Jantu that day. The door of his room was kept tightly shut and the only ones who entered were Pritexa and Soli. Gonzona ceased her vis-

its which, so Pritexa informed the earth dwellers, had been prompted only by kindness to see if she could alleviate some of the pain and suffering caused by Jantu's injuries.

With making hourly observations to check their rate of progress, putting new charges of that strange powder into the engine of gold, looking from the portholes now and then, and eating when they felt hungry, what corresponded to a day soon passed for Mark, Jack and the scientist.

"In forty-eight hours more, providing we keep up this same speed, we ought to land on Venus," said Jack on beginning what would be the second night, though there was no sign of darkness.

"Yes," said the captain, looking at the speed gauge, "we are doing very well."

"How do you make a landing without going all to smash?" asked Mark. "You haven't any landing gear or compression plungers, as far as I can see."

"That is controlled by the engine of gold," was the answer. "We set up a current of negative gravity and we land on Venus as gently as what you call a feather. The earth landing, not only of the first car in which Gozona and I traveled but also that of Jantu and Soli, should have been equally gentle and there should have been no accident, but we did not know accurately the density of your atmosphere and could not take

the proper precautions. But we know about Venus, and there will be no smash."

"That's a consoling thought," said Jack. "But I wonder if we can control the *Blue Streak* when we shoot back to earth in it? How about that, Pritexa?"

The captain did not answer. Instead, he sprang to his feet and pointed toward one of the heavy glass windows. Mark and his companions saw that they were hurtling into a queer yellow cloud or haze.

"Quick! The masks!" cried Pritexa. "It is the yellow snow! Breathe it not at your peril! The masks! Quick!"

He sprang toward the locker in which they were kept. At the same moment the earth dwellers became aware of a sweet, sickish odor that was penetrating the metal sides of the craft. It was overpowering, like an anæsthetic. They began to feel very faint.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WANDERING COMET

FULLY aware of the danger that surrounded them, Pritexa had acted not a moment too soon. In an instant of time he had tossed protecting masks to the three earth dwellers and then donned one himself. Even in the midst of this terror Jack could not help noticing, as he said to Mark afterward, that Pritexa acted as a true host. For he first supplied his guests with the protecting masks and then got one for himself. He also tossed one to Soli.

There was a sinister reason for this preference, as the three visitors were to learn soon and to their sorrow. However, now it seemed a very gracious gesture to them.

In the forward part of the *Blue Streak* Gozona was also made aware of the entrance of the craft into that murky, yellow cloud. For no sooner had the five in the engine room donned their masks than they saw the girl in blue coming toward them, also wearing one. Pritexa mo-

tioned to ask if she had given one to Jantu and she signed an assent.

Relying on the protection of the queer contrivances which covered their heads completely, enabling them to breathe greatly condensed oxygen from a small chamber of it in the top of the mask, the earth-born could now view more composedly the strange phenomenon about them. The *Blue Streak* was hurtling along in a dense cloud of yellow vapor, and the remark of Pritexa that it was "snow" seemed borne out by the evidence of the eyes of the earth dwellers.

It must be remembered that on this voyage through space the passengers were hermetically sealed within the projectile, or ship, in which they were traveling. In no other way could they have made the trip.

So all the knowledge those in the *Blue Streak* could gather of the yellow vapor was of its penetrating odor and by observation through the thick glass portholes. But the description given in that hasty warning by Pritexa that it was "snow" was plainly true. Great, yellow flakes sifted around the speeding craft and dashed against the glass windows. The flakes were larger than any ever observed on earth, and they seemed to be frozen vapor, for they melted on touching the warm airship, and little trickling streams of water, like yellow ochre, ran down the glass of the ports.

At one time the *Blue Streak* ran into such a dense cloud of the yellow snow that the interior of the craft was considerably darkened and the glow lights had to be switched on. This was evidently the center of the curious storm, as after that the darkness grew less, and in about fifteen minutes they had passed completely through the disturbance and the last of the yellow flakes was left behind.

But when, observing this from a port, Jack was about to take off his mask, Gozona, with a quick gesture and a negative shake of her head, indicated to him that he must not do so. The other earth dwellers, likewise, retained their protective coverings. The reason for this was obvious to every one in the *Blue Streak*.

Since the gas, or whatever it was that was given off by the yellow snow, could penetrate the double metal hull of the craft, it followed that some of the vapor would remain in the cabin and other compartments after the craft had passed through the cloud. Until the last atom of the deadly gas had been removed it would not be safe to take off the masks.

But once out of the region of that queer storm, Pritexa and Soli hastened the clearing of the interior of the craft of the vapor by increasing the generation of oxygen from the machine set up for that purpose. By consulting the at-

mosmometer, a device similar to a thermometer, the captain was able to ascertain when it was safe to take off the uncomfortable head pieces. This was about ten minutes after the last of the yellow flakes had been seen.

"Whew, it's good to get that off!" exclaimed Jack, laying aside his mask.

"I should say so!" agreed his chum.

"They are not nice, but they save lives," remarked Gozona, as she glided from the room.

It was not without some pangs of jealousy that Mark and Jack saw her go into the room where the crazy Jantu lay in a hypnotic stupor. But they observed that Gozona did not remain long, merely going in to relieve the unfortunate Venusian of his protective mask.

The jealous feeling was soon forgotten as the young men heard the professor asking Pritexa something about the yellow snow. Ever on the alert to absorb any scientific knowledge they could, Mark and Jack listened to the captain's reply.

"We do not know what it is," said Pritexa, "and probably never shall find out. But it is death to breathe its gas for more than a few minutes."

"Then you have seen it before?" asked Professor Hertz.

"Oh, yes. Others of our scientists have also,"

was the reply. "You see," he added with a smile, "this is not our first trip through space. We have visited Mercury, though our stay there was short on account of the terrific heat, being only thirty-five million miles from the sun, while Venus is sixty-seven million miles removed. We have also gone to Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus, and on each occasion we have passed through one or more storms of yellow snow.

"It may be that it would not be encountered if we went to the planet Neptune, but that trip we have not yet been able to arrange for. We may, however, some time."

"Why haven't you been to Neptune if you have been to all the other planets, including ours?" asked Jack.

"Because of the terrible distance," was the answer. "Some of our people thought we never could make Uranus, which, as you know, is one billion, eight hundred million miles from the sun, making it a journey for us of almost that extent, lacking only the sixty-seven million miles that we are distant from the sun. But when you remember that Neptune is twice as far from us as is Uranus, the perils of that trip will be appreciated."

"I should say so!" agreed Mark.

"As it was, making the trip to Uranus, we were barely able to get back, having failed to

take enough Bitam and Gasto with us," went on Pritexa. "However, if our people are able to make us a more condensed form of these very necessary substances, so we can take a large quantity in a small space, we may yet reach Neptune, which I have calculated is three billion miles from Venus. This distance is somewhat greater than the figures given by your earth astronomers," he said to Professor Hertz, "but I am convinced that my calculations are right."

"I am not inclined to dispute you," said the earth scientist, with a smile. "But I am curious to know how the deadly nature of the yellow snow was discovered."

"It was by ignoring it when our early space-explorers went to visit Jupiter that it was found that it meant death to breathe its vapor," said the captain. "Many years ago some of our astronomers set off in one of the first of crafts like this. They passed through some yellow snow, as we learned from the notes they made, but they were all killed."

"How did you find that out?" asked Mark.

"Their space-craft, uncontrolled and containing the dead bodies, fell back on Venus," was the answer. "It was opened, and some of those who rushed in, hoping to rescue the crew, were also killed by the few remaining fumes of the yellow crystals. But the vapor was soon dispersed and

then the hasty notes, written by those who succumbed to the deadly poison, were read and in future trips proper precautions were taken. Ever since, when we travel through space, we are ready with gas masks to don as soon as we observe the yellow snow. The poison vapor from it can penetrate any thickness. Our masks alone, chemically treated, neutralize it."

"It's bad stuff, all right," observed Jack.

"I hope the remainder of our journey back to Venus will be more pleasant," said the captain a little later, when they were all, with the exception of Jantu, gathered in the main cabin. He and Soli, with the beautiful girl in blue, had dined in their own way on Gasto and Bitam, while the professor and the two young scientists had made a more substantial meal on the food they had brought with them.

"It is all interesting," said Jack. "The only thing that worries me is that when we are navigating this ship back to earth we may run into worse perils than the yellow snow. We now know how to guard against that. But if something unforeseen should happen, what would we do?"

For a moment Pritexa did not answer, and Mark thought he saw him and Soli looking at each other in a peculiar manner. To make sure of this and to ascertain, if possible, whether there

was any basis for an alarming suspicion that had entered his mind, Mark asked pointedly:

"Do you think, Pritexa, that we shall be able to manage this *Blue Streak* by ourselves—I mean when we three start back to earth?"

"You have been instructed how to operate the engines," was the captain's answer. "You need have no fear on that score. Do not be alarmed," and then, as if to change the subject he added: "Would you not like to hear some music?"

"Music? Ah, yes!" exclaimed the professor, who had all the German fondness for melody. "But I have seen no piano or other instrument on board. Perhaps, though, you or our gracious lady will sing without accompaniment," and he looked at Gozona.

"When I said music," replied Pritexa, with a smile, "I had reference to the radio. Though whether we can get contact with your earth or with Venus remains to be seen. Perhaps we are too distant from either planet to insure good reception. I will, however, try."

He adjusted the radio set, but all that came from it were some distressing howls and he had to give it up.

"We are about halfway between Venus and the earth," he said, "and our set is not powerful enough to pick up signals from either place. But

that need not prevent us from having a concert. You have doubtless heard of the music of the spheres?" he questioned.

"Often!" exclaimed the professor eagerly. "I have often wanted to listen to it, but I have never been able to devise an instrument delicate enough to catch those wonderful melodies. One of the red dwarfs on the City Beyond the Clouds had a machine which, though crudely made, seemed to bring in faint music from the distant stars. He was one of the best of those imps," went on the professor, "and if things had gone differently I should have liked to go further into the matter with him. But we had to leave there in a hurry," he concluded, with a wry smile.

"About this sphere music," said Mark, "I don't mind admitting my ignorance and saying I've never heard of it."

"There has long been a theory among some scientists," explained Professor Hertz, while Pritexa went to a piece of apparatus and began adjusting it, "a theory that the stars and planets in moving through space generate certain beautiful music beyond the range of human ears. Whether it is really true or not, I am unable to state."

"You will not long be in doubt," said Gozona. "Listen!"

She pointed to the instrument, something like

a radio set, which Pritexa was adjusting. A moment later a rosy glow came from it.

Instantly the cabin was filled with a wild, though beautiful, melody played in a harmony like nothing the young men or the professor had ever heard on earth. It seemed to lift them out of themselves and, as Mark said later, could be likened to nothing but a wonderful orchestra with instruments of a range and power and delicacy unknown on earth.

Now as soft as a summer wind and again howling like a hurricane blast, but always melodious, the music of the spheres filled them all with unknown longings. At times it soothed them to the verge of slumber and again it seemed to invite them to dance. So much so, in the latter respect, that at one point Jack was almost irresistibly impelled to invite Gonzona to waltz with him. But he did resist, for he did not know how the girl in blue would look upon this.

"It is wonderful! Amazing!" exclaimed Mark softly.

"Best concert I ever heard, Professor," said Jack.

The old German scientist sat with closed eyes. He had not moved since the first strains of the sphere music were heard. Now he seemed to come back as if from a trance.

"I have been—I have been in the realms of the

blessed," he said in a low voice. "I have been taken out of myself—beyond the sordid cares of the world. It was like nothing I ever before experienced. I thank you, sir," he said, and he bowed gravely to Pritexa.

"Such is the music of the spheres," was the answer.

The earth dwellers retired soon after that, the echoes of the strange melodies still ringing in their ears. It was bright daylight, but they must have sleep.

On and on through space the *Blue Streak* shot. What corresponded to the second night passed peacefully, and when morning, if such it can be called, was ushered in and the earth dwellers assembled at their breakfast, Jack remarked:

"We ought to be there by to-night."

"Or by this time to-morrow," said Pritexa. "The yellow snow deflected us from our path, but we are again on our course."

Some adjustments were necessary to the machinery after the meal, and Jack and the professor were helping make them when Mark, who had gone to the forward observation compartment, came running back in a state of great excitement.

"Venus ahead!" he shouted exultantly. "Venus ahoy!"

"It cannot be!" exclaimed Pritexa, dropping

the instrument he held. "We are not due for twenty-four hours."

"Well, I see some sort of planet looming up ahead!" declared Mark. "It's different from any others we've sighted," he added, for in the journey through space they had, necessarily, passed different stars and some unknown planets. "Better take a look," he advised the captain. "You know more about this region than I do."

With an anxious look on his face, Pritexa followed Mark to the observation room. Jack and the professor trailed along. No sooner had the captain looked at what Mark indicated than he cried:

"Turn on the repulse power! We must avoid this at any cost!"

"What is it?" asked Jack as he saw, a long distance ahead, what seemed to be merely a mass of vapor.

"It's a wandering comet!" cried Pritexa. "It has no fixed orbit—at least, we've never discovered its orbit—and is as likely to crash into us as it is to pass us by. We must try to repulse it —to keep it away! There is no time to lose!"

CHAPTER XV

A GIANT METEOR

THOUGH in their previous voyages through space, Jack Darrow, Mark Sampson, and in one case Professor Hertz had obtained distant views of comets, this was the first time they had been so near a direct contact. Little is known of comets. Opinion is divided as to whether they are a solid body, like a meteor, or whether they consist merely of a mass of luminous gas, or of millions of small particles of matter held together by some attraction and, as such, wandering through space.

There was no time now to discuss theories about comets. Evidently, Pritexa realized the danger of crashing into one or having it hit the *Blue Streak,* if he did not know the exact nature of the mysterious sky traveler.

"What are we to do?" cried Jack. "She's coming nearer!"

"Oh, we are prepared for this emergency," quickly answered the captain. "We have a repulsing machine on board that is designed, some-

what on the principle of our negative gravity apparatus, to deflect comets and other eccentrically moving bodies of space. Come, I will show you how it works."

"Why can't you steer the *Blue Streak* past the comet?" asked the professor. He and the boys knew the craft could be guided somewhat as an airship of the plane type is steered. Only in the case of the *Blue Streak* the direction of the craft to left or right or up or down was done by different streams of rocket-gas from the base. There were four propelling tubes. When all four were operated the *Blue Streak* was kept on a straight course in the direction in which she was originally headed. To send her to the left, the issuance of gas from that tube was shut off and, with power coming from the right side of the base, curved the projectile that way. The two elevating tubes at the same time being in operation, the craft kept the height originally determined.

To go higher the upper tube was cut off and the lower one alone used. Conversely, to descend, the lower tube power was dispensed with and the upper one allowed to function, which depressed the nose of the ship.

"Yes, we can steer ourselves," said Pritexa. "But it is of little use to try to steer out of the way of a comet. They behave in what seems to

us such an eccentric manner that if we went to the left they might go to the right and we would collide. Likewise the same if we tried to go above or below it. The only way is to set up a repelling force and try to give a new impetus to the comet. In that way we may be able to shunt it off on another orbit so we can pass in safety."

Though their danger was great and imminent, the captain of the *Blue Streak* did not lose his nerve, nor did Soli. Gozona came from her cabin and, seeming to know as much about the mechanism of the craft as did either of her companions, she turned wheels, adjusted gauges, set switches, and in every way helped to get the repelling machine into shape for the exercise of its power. Jack, Mark, and the professor did as they were told, mixing up certain chemicals in test tubes and pouring them into metal chambers.

"We should have had this engine in instant readiness," said the captain. "But we did not use it on our trip to your earth and our assistant astronomers, who computed a chart for us, said there was no danger of any comet being encountered for several months. But I should have been ready for emergencies, knowing, as I do from experience, that our knowledge of comets is as yet far from adequate. However, we shall do our best."

"Are we in any immediate danger?" asked Jack.

"Yes, we are," was the answer. "Though that comet is many thousands of miles away, its speed is terrific, exceeding our own at present. I can increase our speed if needful, but I think this method, of trying to shunt the comet to one side, will be better.

"If you will go to the forward observatory," he went on to Jack, "and will signal what you see, we shall be able to use our judgment back here. You can communicate with us over this," and he indicated an instrument on the wall of the motor room.

Jack hurried forward again. He was startled by what he observed. Right ahead, though of course a long distance away, was a great mass of swirling white vapor. As it parted now and again, as clouds do, the young scientist had glimpses of billowing flames.

"So that's what a comet is!" cried Jack. "A moving mass of fire! If we get involved in that —good night!"

He telephoned back what he had seen and Pritexa said:

"We have yet a chance. That is only the gas envelope of the comet. The body itself is solid and dark in color. When you see that let me know and I will try to avoid it."

"Right!" called back Jack, and he stared through the heavy glass window in the end of the *Blue Streak*. He remembered how once, when a comet was seen to be nearing the earth, the astronomers computed that our world would pass through the tail. There was some speculation as to whether or not the earth would be destroyed, but most of the scientists declared that the comet's tail was only a thin gas that could work no harm.

So it proved. At least, if the earth did pass through the tail of the comet, no one knew about it and nothing happened.

"But this thing doesn't look so innocent," mused Jack, as he held his post of observation. "If we drive into that cloud of fire we'll be in trouble."

Nearer and nearer the *Blue Streak* approached the comet.

At last Jack caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a dark core of the vaporous mass.

"Look out!" he warned those in the engine room over the telephone.

"Turn on the power!" called Pritexa to Soli and the two earth dwellers. They had been told what to do and did it quickly. Gozona was at a lever that required all her strength to shift, but she managed it. Then came a period of anxious waiting.

There was a whirr of wheels in the strange re-

pulsing machine, and strange lights gleamed about it. For a moment no effect was observed. Then a strange force seemed to grip the craft. She tilted to one side and then the other.

"It is the attraction of the comet!" cried the captain. "We must have more repelling power!"

He made an adjustment of the apparatus, while Soli put in more of the strange chemical and Gozona let some drops of red liquid trickle into a cylinder.

A shudder seemed to pass through the *Blue Streak*. It was as though two forces were contending for the mastery of her. Would the power of the repelling engine overcome that of the comet?

The telephone bell tinkled above the roar of the machinery. Professor Hertz sprang to answer.

"Well?" he cried.

Back came Jack's answer:

"All right! The comet is sheering off into space!"

"And just in time!" exclaimed Pritexa when he was told this. "We had used the last atom of our power. A fraction more pull from the comet, and we would have collided with it. Now the danger is past."

"Would it not be well," suggested Gozona, "to run the repelling engine a little longer?"

"Oh, I intend to," replied the captain. "I will take no chances."

The comet was soon a long way off. Not until then was the repelling machinery shut down. Then once more the travelers breathed freely.

They were all glad to rest after that terrific strain, and for a few hours no one did anything except what was necessary. The machinery needed little attention, a slight change in direction being given now and then to keep the craft headed for Venus.

Professor Hertz turned on the machine and again listened to the music of the spheres. He almost wept in sheer delight at the beauty of the melodies he heard. A little later, Pritexa, coming into the cabin, said:

"I think I can now get our planet on the radio."

He went to the regular radio, and talk of the same kind the earth travelers had heard the Venusians speak soon came from the loud speaker. Gozona, Soli and Pritexa smiled in delight at this evidence of nearing their home. But the captain, knowing his guests were not familiar with the language, tuned in a different station where music was being broadcast.

"That is the language universal," he said, with a smile.

"Yes, indeed, music knows no boundaries," said the professor.

They listened for some time to the concert from Venus, and Jack was about to propose that it might be a good thing if he and his two companions knew a little of the language of the strange planet when Gozona suddenly pointed to a thermometer on the wall of the cabin.

"Look!" she exclaimed.

"How fast it is rising!" said Mark.

"I've been noticing that it's been getting warm in here for the last few minutes," said Jack. "Can there be anything wrong in the engine room?" he asked the captain.

"I'll go and look!" offered Soli.

Before he could leave the cabin, Professor Hertz cried:

"There is what causes the heat!" He pointed to a great red flame that could be seen through one of the glass ports hovering in space just beyond the speeding craft.

"A meteor!" cried the captain. "A giant, flaming meteor! And passing dangerously close," he added. "Dangerously close!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE PLOTTERS

IMPELLED by the same thought, Jack Darrow and Mark Sampson sprang toward the engine room. They wanted to set in motion the repelling apparatus which, they hoped, would deflect the giant meteor as it had deflected the comet.

But Pritexa evidently guessed what was in their minds, for he called:

"It is of no use! We have not time! We must take our chances!"

It was a desperate situation. Hotter and hotter grew the air in the *Blue Streak*. The red column in the thermometer went higher and higher. It was close to 90° now. How much more could the passengers stand?

There was no way of obtaining relief by opening a window or a door. At once the oxygen inside the ship would escape and the lives of all on the *Blue Streak* would be snuffed out.

Fascinated by the deadly peril that was so near, all gazed from the port toward the giant, red, flaming mass that was coming nearer and nearer.

A dreadful roaring sound filled their ears. The temperature was still rising. It was close to 100° now.

The heat, of course, was caused by the near approach of that red-hot, almost molten mass of the giant meteor, and the roaring was caused by its flames and its passage through space. The theory that only where there is air, or an atmosphere present, can sounds be heard, seemed disproved in this case. For the ether conveyed to those in the projectile craft a great sound as of a thousand Niagaras.

Nearer and nearer the *Blue Streak* approached the meteor, which was some immense fragment torn from, or tossed off, some ancient world, star or planet, even as our moon is a part broken off from our earth.

Then, when it seemed that they could no longer breathe in that stiffling heat, Gozona, with a little cry of relief, pointed to the thermometer.

The red column again stood at 90°.

"It's going down!" murmured Jack.

"We must be out of range of the meteor," added Mark.

"And only just in time," said the professor. "See, there it goes!" and he pointed to the red, flaming mass growing smaller in the limitless space surrounding them. "It will soon burn itself out."

The near approach to Venus seemed to bring the travelers into many more dangers than were observed on the first part of their journey from the earth. A few hours after escaping from the giant meteor they passed through a shower of asteroids and except for the skillful guidance on the part of Pritexa the *Blue Streak* would have been severely damaged if not completely demolished by contact with even the smallest of these fragments.

Then they encountered another wind storm, or what corresponded to it, and the *Blue Streak* was tossed about like a ship on an angry ocean of water. But the navigators from Venus were skilled in their handling of the craft, and she passed through the great disturbance safely.

However, these encounters served to delay the ship and when what corresponded to night came they were still a long way from Venus.

"We cannot reach the planet until noon tomorrow," said Gozona, as she consulted the charts. "But there is no great harm done," and she smiled at her guests.

"Oh, no, a day more or less doesn't much matter," agreed Jack.

"Though I am anxious to begin my studies of the planet," said the professor.

"You will find Venus very different from your earth," said the captain, smiling, though in what

seemed to be a rather strange manner. "It is to be hoped that you will like Venus and her people."

"Oh, we're sure to do that," answered Mark. "Her people seem to be very nice," and, whether intentionally or not, he looked at Gozona. But she did not look at him.

"We shall probably enjoy our stay," said Professor Hertz. "But, unfortunately, we cannot remain long."

"Why not?" asked Soli in what seemed to be a challenging voice.

"Our interests are on earth," replied Jack.

"Besides," added his chum, "we did not bring food enough for a long visit. And we can't drink that blue water or live on flower perfume, much as it seems to agree with you and Gozona," he concluded.

"We may find some food to your liking," said the captain, and then he left the room.

It was when Mark and Jack were going to their staterooms to get some sleep that they passed the apartment of Gozona. She had a small private sitting room beside her sleeping apartment. A murmur of voices came from it and the tones of Pritexa and Soli were distinguishable, mingled with the more melodious voice of the girl in blue. They were talking in the Venusian language, of course, but by this time Mark and Jack

had managed to pick up a little of it. As for Professor Hertz, who was a natural linguist and knew many foreign tongues, he had become quite adept.

"Did you hear that?" asked Jack in a whisper of his chum, following some rather high-pitched talk on the part of Pritexa.

"Yes. He said, as near as I could make out, that he must keep somebody in captivity."

"Wonder who he meant?"

"Probably Jantu. That fellow's a bad actor."

"Yes, I guess that's who they're talking about," agreed Jack. "They're probably planning what to do with him when they get to Venus."

They passed on to their staterooms, but if they had been able to hear and understand all the talk of the plotters, they would not have slept as easily as they did.

For there was a terrible plot being concocted behind the door of Gozona's cabin, though, as the young men learned later, she had no part in it, though she was forced to agree with the men.

"Yes, we must keep these earth ones captives on Venus forever," said Pritexa, as Mark and Jack passed on. "We will let them think for a time that they can journey back in this ship. But we will not let them go."

"We would be foolish if we did!" cried Soli. "We can gain much scientific honor by exhibiting

these earth dwellers among the schools and before our astronomical societies."

"And our queen will give us not only honor, but riches, for bringing her these strange people who know not how to drink the blue water," said Pritexa. "She is always fond of novelties. Decidedly, we must keep these three captives!"

"Of course!" agreed Soli.

"What if they will not consent?" asked Gozona. "Oh, I beg of you to give up this mad plan!"

"Never!" cried Pritexa. "They shall remain captives! Captives on Venus! In a few hours we shall arrive and very glad I shall be to get back."

"I, too," murmured the girl in blue. "But it seems like a betrayal to bring these people with us and then make prisoners of them. Please do not do it!"

"It is in the interest of science and must be done!" said Soli.

"Yes," agreed Pritexa, "it must be done!"

CHAPTER XVII

IN DESPERATE STRAITS

JACK DARROW and Mark Sampson had been sleeping several hours when they were carefully awakened, one after the other, by Professor Hertz, who held his finger over his lips as a sign of caution and whispered:

"Come into my stateroom. I have something to tell you."

He seemed so alarmed over something that the young men, hastily slipping off their pajamas and getting into their clothes, followed him down the corridor. No one was in sight and the *Blue Streak* was still progressing at her terrific speed toward Venus. A look from a side port showed Jack that they were in bright sunshine.

"What's up?" asked Mark, as he and his chum entered the stateroom of the scientist. It was larger than either of theirs.

"I have just overheard something that I think I should tell you," said Gustavus Hertz, in a low voice. "I happened to overhear some talk among our three friends—though in view of what I

learned, I doubt if I should call them friends—and they seemed to be plotting against us."

"Plotting!" cried Mark.

"Yes. Listen and I will tell you all I heard. As you are aware, I have managed to acquire a working knowledge of the Venusian language. I can understand it better than I can speak it, for it does not blend well with my native guttural German tongue. A little while ago, when I was passing the apartments of Gozona, I overheard her talking with Soli and Pritexa. From what I heard, I judge that they are going to hold us captives, once we reach Venus."

"Captives!" exclaimed Jack. "Why, we heard them use that word, didn't we, Mark?" and he appealed to his chum.

"Yes," answered the other, and detailed the circumstances under which, while he and Jack were on their way to take some rest, a few hours before, they, too, had overheard talk. "But we thought they meant to hold Jantu captive on account of his mad actions."

"That would be a natural inference," said the German. "But I heard enough to indicate that it is we three who are to be kept prisoners."

"What for?"

"For scientific observation, for one thing," answered the professor. "As nearly as I can make out, they want to show us around among the

schools so the pupils will have an idea what our earth inhabitants look like. Then, too, their astronomers want to question us. Also, Pritexa said he thought the Queen of Venus would make him and his companions rich for bringing to her notice some earth folk. Oh, they have made up their minds to hold us!"

"Didn't they promise us that we could have this ship in which to go back to earth?" asked Jack.

"That's what I understood," added Mark. "Gozona said that more than once, especially when she was begging us to help her and the others get back to Venus. I suggested then that we should want to get back, and she said we could use the *Blue Streak.*"

"Sure, she did!" cried Jack. "Gee, if she's that kind of a girl I don't want anything more to do with her!" He spoke bitterly and it was easy to see that he and Mark felt very bad over a betrayal on the part of the girl in blue.

"It isn't the wish of Gozona at all to do us any harm," said the older scientist. "She pleaded our cause as best she could. But she is in the minority. These men are too much for her."

"And I doubt if Jantu would be on our side, even if he weren't crazy," said Jack.

"Not after the way he tackled you," said Mark grimly. "No, we seem to be up against it, if what you heard is true, Professor."

"I am sure of what I heard," answered Professor Hertz. "And, unfortunately, it seems to be only too true—I mean their intentions in regard to us. In spite of their implied promise to let us have the means of transportation back to earth, they are going to keep us on Venus as captives."

"For how long?" Mark asked.

"That I didn't hear stated."

"As the song has it," said Jack, "'it may be for years and it may be forever.' Oh, gosh, what a pickle we are in!" he added, with a quick change from his joking manner.

"Can't we do something?" asked Mark.

"What would you suggest?" inquired the professor. "I summoned you here to talk matters over with a view to seeing what we could do. It is a desperate strait to be in."

"Can't we mutiny, seize the ship, and run her back to earth?" asked Jack.

"Some such plan occurred to me," the German said. "But we are not quite familiar with her method of operation yet, though, in general, we can run the engine of gold and other apparatus. It is in an emergency, such as meeting a comet again or a big meteor, that we might run into trouble instead of away from it.

"Besides, I doubt if we could turn the ship about and go on a reverse course all the way back

to earth with the power still available. There is some sort of powder that is giving energy to the engine of gold. That supply, as we know, is running low. It must be renewed on reaching Venus. If we could manage to overpower these men and turn the craft around, heading back to our planet, we should probably never reach it. The engine would stop and we should hang suspended in everlasting space."

"We don't want that to happen," said Mark.

"What do you propose?" asked Jack.

"The only feasible plan," the scientist answered, "is to keep on as we have been for the last four days and show nothing of our suspicions. We shall soon be on Venus, if nothing happens. In the few hours that remain we should try to learn as much as possible about running the ship."

"I get you!" exclaimed Jack. "And when we land we can find some way of replenishing the fuel supply and then shoot back to earth the first chance we get."

"That, to my mind, is the best plan," said the professor. "What do you say, Mark?"

"I presume it's the only thing we can do. Certainly making a row now won't do us any good. As you say, we might run out of power for the machinery and go shooting off in space like the Flying Dutchman. But I didn't think it of Gozona!"

"She isn't a willing party to the plot against us," put in Jack. "I'm sure she isn't."

"I think Gozona is our friend," said the German. "Well, then, this will be our plan: We will pretend ignorance of any plot. We will act as naturally as we can and learn all we can about such of the machinery as we are now ignorant of. And when we land on Venus we shall see what happens."

"Yes," agreed the young men.

It was a most disastrous change in their fortunes. Could it be possible? All the joy was taken out of the trip. As Mark and Jack thought back and remembered certain actions and remarks on the part of Pritexa and Soli, they could not but admit that Professor Hertz was right. Their seeming friends had turned enemies.

"Well," said Jack, with a sigh, "we've got to go through with it."

"Yes," agreed Mark. "But I wonder——"

His voice stopped as a sharp tapping on the door of the professor's stateroom came to their ears.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BLUE LAKE

THE three worried travelers from the earth might themselves have been considered conspirators had any one observed them as that tapping sounded on the closed door of the professor's stateroom, for Professor Hertz, as well as Mark Sampson and Jack Darrow, jumped nervously at the sound. But in a moment the German-American regained mastery of himself.

"Who is it?" he asked, and by a look he enjoined silence on his companions. They could only hope their recent talk had not been overheard. For their plans to escape might better be carried out if they pretended to know nothing of the plot of Pritexa and Soli.

"I have been looking for you," said the voice of Pritexa just outside the door, and his tone showed nothing unusual. "We must prepare to make a landing."

"On Venus?" asked Jack eagerly.

"Where else?" asked the captain, with a laugh.

"I thought maybe you couldn't make it," went

on Jack, "and that we might have to jump off on to a meteor or the satellite of some other planet."

"No," answered Pritexa, "we are headed for Venus, but we shall not arrive as soon as I expected and it will be after dark."

"After dark!" exclaimed the professor, as he opened his door and revealed Pritexa standing there, smiling and seemingly not at all suspicious at finding the three earth dwellers in close consultation.

"When we near Venus that planet will be between us and the sun," explained the other. "Consequently we shall be in her shadow. Of course we could circle around and land by daylight, but that would mean we should be on a part of Venus far removed from our own city of Kar. So if you be pleased to lend your aid, we shall prepare to land in a few hours. Considerable preparation is necessary. I have been wondering where you were," Pritexa added.

"I have been talking to my friends," said the professor. "We want to make certain observations when we reach your planet, observations that will be welcomed by our scientists when we return to earth."

"I have no doubt but that you will find things on our world somewhat different from those on your own," said Pritexa. "And, when you go

back, it will be as you say, your scientists will be interested."

Was there sarcasm in these words? The three earth dwellers gazed covertly at one another and wondered. Yet the manner of Pritexa seemed without guile.

"I must now attend to my engines," he said. "When you are ready, if you will come to the control room I will instruct you in what you are to do so we may land safely."

He turned to walk down the corridor leading to the engine room, and as it was no part of the plan of the three to foster any suspicions in his mind that they suspected him, the professor and the two young men followed.

"You spoke of the city of Kar," said Jack. "It sounds almost as if we were going to land on our own earth."

"Venus is not so different in her physical characteristics from your world as you might suppose," explained Pritexa. "It is true we live different lives, more of the mind than of the body, though some of our inhabitants are on a lower level than we who belong to the scientific order. This includes my companions and me," he said modestly enough.

"But you must remember that Venus is very nearly the same size as your own earth, it revolves on its axis in the same way though at only half

the speed of your earth, so our days and nights are twice as long as yours."

"Then you must have only about three and a half days in a week," said Mark.

"No," explained the captain as he made some adjustments to the engine of gold, for they were now in the control room, "that does not follow. For we revolve around the sun at twice the speed of the earth, so that our orbit circuit is completed in half the time of your three hundred and sixty-five days. Thus we have what corresponds to a week of seven days, though each day and each night is twice as long as yours."

"Fine place for a night club," laughed Jack.

"This is most interesting to learn," said Professor Hertz. "I mean," he hastily added as Mark and Jack looked at him in some surprise, "about the length of the days and weeks. I haven't any interest in night clubs," he concluded, with a laugh.

"Have you a moon?" asked Mark. Though this information about Venus might have been obtained before, so many things had happened that it had not occurred to the earth dwellers to ask. They had thought to postpone their efforts to gain scientific knowledge until they had actually reached the strange planet.

"We have a moon," answered Pritexa. "But as it is nearer to us than your moon is to you, it

gives twice the light. It shines, when full, with almost the brilliance of the sun."

"There can't be much poetry in going canoeing on a blue lake under the moon if it's as bright as that," murmured Jack.

"The thing to do," suggested Mark, "would be to go out in the half moon."

"Like Henry Hudson!" chuckled his companion.

In spite of the gravity of their position—and that it was grave they realized when they thought of it—there were moments when a joke was appreciated. This was more true in respect to the two young men than to Professor Hertz. He had his son and daughter to think of and was, naturally, anxious to return to the earth. As for Mark and Jack, they had no intention of becoming permanent residents of Venus, but there were not the same ties to urge them back to earth. They had no relatives, and, though they were very fond of Professor Henderson, he was bound to them by no ties of blood nor was he economically dependent on them.

"If there's enough to interest a fellow on Venus and we could find the right kind of food, I shouldn't mind staying for a year or so," said Jack in a low voice to Mark, when they found themselves alone for a moment.

"I suppose you are thinking of half moonlight

sails on the lake with some pretty girl," suggested Mark.

"Maybe," his chum admitted.

"Well, I don't like the idea of being held a prisoner, and that's what it will amount to if what the professor overheard is true," said Mark. "So I'm going to do my best to get away soon after we land and find out some things."

Pritexa and Professor Hertz, who had left the control compartment to make some adjustments to machinery in another part of the craft, now returned with Soli.

"Are there large cities on Venus, Kar among them?" asked Gustavus Hertz.

"Oh, yes," the captain replied. "We have not as many nor as large cities as earth dwellers have, for a large part of Venus is more desolate than any desert on earth. Kar is where I and my friends dwell. It is on that part of Venus where the water is blue—the life-giving Bitam. We are separated from the other half of our world by almost impassable mountains. On that other half the waters are red, and are not as potent as our Bitam. So Venus is really inhabited by two distinct races of people that never mingle."

"It must be a most interesting planet from a scientific standpoint," said the professor. "I am eager to make some observations."

"You shall have ample opportunity," said

Pritexa, and again his earth hearers wondered if he was speaking sarcastically.

However, he seemed sincere enough. Mark and Jack could not but note how the German-born scientist let his zeal for science outrun his own consideration for his personal safety in getting away from Venus and back to earth.

But a little later, while the preparations for landing went on, Professor Hertz found opportunity to whisper to Jack and Mark:

"It is true! I have overheard some more. They are going to make prisoners of us as soon as we land."

"So soon as that?" cried Jack.

"Can we do anything to stop it?" asked Mark.

"Not now," was the answer. "We must bide our time. I do not believe our lives are in any danger—we are considered too valuable for them to wish to harm us. But I do not relish being kept captive."

"Nor do I!" said Mark, while Jack added:

"I'll get Gozona to fix things up for us."

"I fear she will be unable to give us aid, though she may wish to," said Professor Hertz. "Pritexa and Soli dominate her."

Several hours passed, during which the various engines and machines were set and adjusted to make the landing on Venus as gentle as possible. In this interval little was seen of Gozona, and the

door to the cabin where Jantu was a hypnotic prisoner remained closed.

"It's getting dark!" exclaimed Jack as he was sitting with his two earth companions in the main cabin.

For the first time since leaving the earth, except when passing through the yellow snow or in the gloom of vapors from the comet and other space-bodies, twilight was beginning to fall. It was most natural and grateful after the glaring sunlight through which they had been speeding for so long a time.

"We must be entering the shadow of Venus, who is now between us and the sun," said the professor.

"That is true, my friends," said Pritexa, entering the room at that moment. "We shall land in about fifteen minutes. You may get ready for Venus!" and he laughed a little.

Was there any sinister meaning in his laugh? his hearers wondered.

However, there was little time for speculation. Much yet remained to be done and they hastened to their stations. Gozona, too, had her tasks to perform in the manipulation of certain valves.

Darkness now gathered rapidly as the *Blue Streak* entered deeper into the shadow of Venus. Now, for the first time since leaving the earth, they saw stars shining, something it had not been

possible to observe before, owing to the intense sunlight through which they traveled.

Deeper and deeper grew the night. Presently a bright glow appeared directly ahead of the *Blue Streak,* a silvery, glowing disk.

"Is that Venus?" cried Mark.

"That is Venus," answered Gozona softly. "My beloved Venus!" and she held out her arms as if to welcome the planet.

"What makes it so bright while we are in the dark?" asked Jack.

"It is the moon shining on her," said the girl in blue. "It will presently show above our horizon."

As she spoke, a silver rim of light appeared and then grew and grew until the big moon, about half full, bathed the planet in its wondrous sheen.

"Venus by moonlight!" murmured Jack. "It is more beautiful than our Venice on the grand canal!"

Like a speeding meteor they were approaching the planet that had almost the aspect of the earth the three travelers had left except the exceeding brilliance of the moon.

"Look!" exclaimed Jack, pointing to one of the glass ports. Through it his companions had a glimpse of a large, blue lake, the waves of which sparkled beautifully in the silvery light of the moon. "The blue water!"

"Yes," murmured Gozona, "that is the Bitam which gives us life. And we are back to it none too soon," she added gravely, as she held up her personal flask. But a few drops remained in it; so nearly had the earth voyage been disastrous to her and her companions. Without Bitam they would surely have died.

"Stand by to land!" suddenly called Pritexa. "Start the repelling engines!"

"Are we going to land in the blue lake?" cried Mark, for they were now headed straight for it.

"You need have no fear," said the captain. "That is our regular landing place."

"But the *Blue Streak* is no hydroplane!" objected Jack.

"We shall not land in the water, but on an island," said Pritexa. "Get ready now! Full force repel!" he cried.

The negative gravity machines were thrown into gear with all their power. A moment later there was a slight jar, as of an aeroplane coming to rest, and a moment later the girl in blue smiled at the earth dwellers as she said:

"You are now on Venus!"

CHAPTER XIX

A QUEER GREETING

"VENUS!" exclaimed Jack, hardly able to believe it. "Why," he went on in rather disappointed tones as he looked out of the port and across the lake of blue water, "it's much like our earth."

"You will find many things different!" said the girl in blue.

"Venus!" cried Mark, in a more serious tone than his chum. "Oh, look at those people riding through the air in a little express wagon!" he added, and pointed to a curious sight.

Seen through the window of the *Blue Streak*, was approaching what to Jack, the professor, and Mark seemed to be exactly what the latter had designated it—a small wagon containing three men sailing through the air without visible means of propulsion. The men were in appearance like Soli or Pritexa. The bright moonlight made everything almost as clear as day.

"That is the Mayor of Kar and his two councilors coming out to welcome us," explained

Pritexa. "His official title in our language is Bremster, but it corresponds to your earth mayor."

"But what makes that jigger go?" asked Jack, in his excitement using anything but scientific language.

"That is one of the thought carriages I told you about," said Gozona, guessing correctly the young man's meaning. "It rolls along the ground or sails through the air in response to the thought wish of the occupants. But come, let us leave our craft and greet those who would welcome our guests and us," she said with a friendly little bow to the earth dwellers. "I am anxious to get some fresh Bitam."

"So are we!" added Soli.

"And I fancy Jantu will be much improved by a drink of it and some fresh Gasto," said Pritexa. "You must be prepared for a little unpleasant sensation at first," he warned Jack, Mark, and the professor, as he went toward the main entrance door of the *Blue Streak*.

"Unpleasant sensation?" questioned Jack.

"The atmosphere of Venus, which you will breathe as soon as I open this door, is a little lighter and more volatile than that of your earth," explained the captain. "It may be compared to the air on your highest mountains, I suppose. You will find it exhilarating after a while, though

the first sensations may be a bit unpleasant. But you will find your energies greatly increased."

"Why didn't we have to wear the masks on entering the atmospheric region of Venus?" asked the professor.

"Because," answered Pritexa, with a smile, "I have gradually, but without your knowledge during the last two days, been releasing into the interior of our craft some of the air from Venus, which we had with us compressed into metal cylinders. We always use it in returning to our planet from distant voyages to other planets."

Jack and the other earth dwellers had a glimpse across the blue lake of a shore lined with curious people. The island on which they had landed was a small one and did not appear to be inhabited. Probably there was danger of those on it being injured by the landing of the craft, which was a reason for its desertion.

The thought carriage with the Mayor and his two aides was close at hand now, and seemed about to land in front of the *Blue Streak*.

"Now for it!" murmured Jack to his companions.

There was a hissing sound, as of air rushing into a vacuum, and for a moment the three earth dwellers felt their ears ringing and their heads spinning. They grasped at supports, thinking they were going to fall, but the sensation passed

in a moment, to be succeeded by a splendid feeling of great buoyancy and exhilaration. The eyes of Jack and Mark sparkled, and Professor Hertz, rather aged as he was, seemed to take on new life.

"Follow me!" called Gozona to the two young scientists and the German-born professor. "Do not be alarmed at whatever happens. I will take care of you."

The travelers stepped from the *Blue Streak,* and for the first time an earth dweller set foot on the soil of Venus.

The moon poured her silvery light down upon the country and brilliantly illuminated the scene which, from the aspects of nature, might have been on the earth as well as on Venus. One thing that impressed the visitors, however, was the profusion of flowers. They grew thickly on the island, and the mainland, about a quarter of a mile away, as could be seen in the moonlight, appeared to be carpeted with the blooms.

Gozona saw the wondering gaze of the visitors and said:

"Those flowers are our food and this blue water is our drink."

She ran lightly to the shore of the island and, dipping up some of the bright blue fluid in her flask, drank it eagerly.

"Try it!" she urged Mark and Jack, pouring

some out into the little silver top of her flask that was in the shape of a cup.

"I'll try anything once," said Jack, half grimly.

He sipped the blue water, as did Mark, but they found it both bitter and sour—a most unpleasant drink. They did not need to tell Gozona that they did not like it. Their faces showed that plainly enough.

"You will get accustomed to it!" she said, with a little laugh.

"Not me!" declared Jack.

By this time the thought carriage of the Mayor had landed and he and his aides were approaching Pritexa and Soli, who had gone on ahead of Gozona and the earth-born. There was a rapid exchange of talk in the Venusian tongue among the five, and by their gestures it could be guessed that the three earth dwellers were the subject.

"He is telling them about you," said Gozona, but the professor and the young scientists had already guessed this.

"What is the next move?" asked Mark, as he saw the Mayor and the others walking toward them. At the same time from the crowds on the mainland arose a curious song, like a hymn of praise or thanksgiving. The effect, in that beautiful moonlight and near the sparkling blue lake, was striking.

"You will be taken to the city of Kar, and there

you may rest until you wish to begin your scientific observations," said Gozona. "The food you brought with you will be sent to your abode. Later you will learn to eat as we Venusians eat," she added, with a smile, "and drink the blue water as we do."

"I'm afraid we shall have to remain of the earth earthy," said the professor.

"And we can't stay on Venus very long, much as we should like to," said Jack quickly. "I hope you'll tell these friends of yours, Gozona, that we'll want the *Blue Streak* to go back in before very long."

"That will be attended to," said the girl in blue, and she turned quickly away as the Mayor and the others approached the three earth visitors.

"We shall go to the mainland," said Pritexa. "You will be made welcome to the city of Kar. This is Mayor Zoti and these are his aides Quar and Hof," and he indicated the three, at the same time introducing the professor and the two young men, but making a queer hash of their names as he translated them into the Venusian tongue.

"Pleased to meet you!" said Jack, as nonchalantly as though on earth. The others, through force of habit, murmured a commonplace greeting and it was responded to. The Mayor and his aides seemed rather jolly chaps, so Mark whispered to his chum.

"This way!" called Pritexa, leading the way to where the thought wagon that had brought the officials to the island had been left.

"We can't all get in that!" exclaimed Jack, who, as had the others, had noted the absence of boats on the lake.

"There are other thought carriages," said Pritexa, and he indicated two which must have been on the island when the landing was made. They were like nothing so much as glorified express wagons with which earth boys play.

The captain of the *Blue Streak* signed that he and the three earth visitors would occupy one. In the other Gozona and Soli would be transported to the mainland. Wonderingly, the earth-born took their seats, finding the space not so cramped as they had feared. In a moment, though they could not see that Pritexa did anything to any visible mechanism, the wagon rolled along the island and, on reaching the edge of the water, rose gently, like an aeroplane, and sailed over the blue lake, landing easily on shore where it was at once surrounded by a curious throng.

"Well, I'll be switched!" cried Jack. "That surely is the slickest way of traveling I ever saw!"

"If it is done by thought there must be powerful minds on Venus," declared Mark.

Just after they alighted from the conveyance there was a bustle in the crowd of men, women

and children who had gathered in the bright, almost dazzling, moonlight and a woman thrust herself forward. She threw her arms around Professor Hertz and cried out something in the Venusian language.

"Here, my good woman! Stop, please! I don't know you!" said the professor, for she was now kissing him. "Who is she? What does she say?" he cried, for the words came in such an outburst that with his limited knowledge of the tongue he could not comprehend them. "I greatly appreciate this warm welcome," he went on, trying to get out of her arms and away from her kisses, "but I fear you mistake me for another."

"She says you are her scientific mate!" explained Pritexa, with a sly smile. "That means, on your earth, a husband to her. She says she has been waiting for you a long time!"

"Good gracious! She takes me for her husband! The woman is out of her mind!" cried the shocked scientist, and he managed to break away from her while the crowd was in commotion.

CHAPTER XX

THE RED GUARDS

"KEEP her away from me!" begged the alarmed scientist as he circled about and tried to hide behind Mark and Jack. "I don't know her! I never saw her before! I'm a widower with two grown children. She ought to be ashamed of herself!"

"She is not accountable for what she does," explained Pritexa, while some of the Venusian women succeeded in getting the excited one down a side street. "Her scientific mate, which corresponds to the term husband on your earth, has been missing a long time and her grief has changed her mind." He thus delicately referred to her insanity.

"How did her husband come to be missing?" asked Jack.

"He was one of our foremost astronomers," explained Pritexa, "and, having constructed a ship something like ours, went off in it alone to explore the solar regions. He never returned nor was his craft ever seen again."

"This is dreadful!" murmured Gustavus Hertz. "Am I to be publicly kissed and hugged by her every time she sees me?"

"Her friends will look after her. I have given orders," said Pritexa. "She will trouble you no more. But come, you doubtless will be glad to go to your lodgings and rest. And partake of your earth food?" he suggested.

"I am getting hungry!" admitted Jack.

"I could eat a bit myself," said Mark.

The professor said nothing. He was constantly on the watch lest that woman slip away from those guarding her and return to embrace him.

"You will be lodged in one of our public buildings for a time," went on Pritexa. "After that you will be taken on a tour of observation. Come with me and I will soon have your supply of food brought from the *Blue Streak* and given to you."

The crowd gathered close about the visitors, but, beyond murmuring and calling to one another in their own language, did not molest the three earth dwellers. In personal appearance, save that many of the women wore bright blue garments, such as that which clothed Gozona, the inhabitants of Venus were not unlike those of our earth. Their faces showed keen intelligence, and all appeared extraordinarily healthy. Not a cripple or deformed person was seen and all were well dressed. It seemed an ideal community.

Several men, also clad in blue, like Gozona, were seen walking about with an abstracted air, and Pritexa explained that these were astronomers and space investigators of the highest order.

"Some day I, too, will wear blue," he said. "It is the badge of great honor."

"I wonder," murmured Jack to Mark as they accompanied their guide along a street of tall structures, followed by the throng, "when he speaks of lodging us in a public building, if he means a jail?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," answered Mark. "We've got to watch out."

"But what can we do?" asked his chum. "We're helpless in this mob," and he glanced at the throng all about them, hemming them in.

"We have our automatics," suggested Mark, significantly tapping the pocket where his rested. "We might shoot our way out."

"No," said Jack in a low voice. "They may or may not know about firearms on Venus. But even if we could kill a few, the rest would overpower us in their rage. And I have a suspicion that any race as far advanced scientifically as this one on Venus, where they ride in thought wagons, will have some form of weapon as superior to automatics as automatics are to bows and arrows."

"Maybe!" agreed Mark. "It sounds possible."

"So," went on Jack, "if we began shooting in an

endeavor to escape, they might wither us up by some hypnotic power and that would be the end of us. I think the best thing to do will be to put our case up to Gozona and ask her to help us get away in the *Blue Streak*. That is, if they really intend to keep us prisoners."

"I guess you're right," assented Mark. "Well, we'll soon know. Looks as though this was where we are going to stay for a while."

Their guide, for by this time the Mayor and his aides had gone away, halted in front of an imposing structure built, it seemed, of red marble which gleamed with great beauty in the bright rays of the half moon—a moon that, only partly "turned on," as Jack remarked, gave more light than our moon at full.

By this time most of the crowd had dispersed, and the professor, looking around, was relieved at not seeing the woman who had claimed him as her lost mate.

All during their brief journey along the streets of Kar, the earth dwellers had noticed that it was beautifully if curiously laid out. It was a dream city of wide streets, parks with fountains spurting in them, flowers growing on every side, and buildings of wondrous beauty. Some were of white marble, others of black or yellow or red, still others were constructed of a different stone. But one and all were marvels of architecture, some

rising tall and slender like fairy spires and towers, while a few had the grotesque, but not unlovely, form of the rounded snow huts of Eskimos, though much larger.

All in all, Kar, one of the large cities of Venus, impressed the travelers as being a beautiful place in which to live and they would have enjoyed reaching it had it not been for the underlying thought that they were to be held captive.

One thing struck the explorers from the earth as peculiar and that was that the whole city seemed to be laid out in triangles instead of squares. Even the lovely parks here and there were in triangular shape. And when they had a chance to peer into some of the stores or shops they found that these also were three cornered.

"Must have a crush on triangles," murmured Mark.

"I'll bet it is something superstitious," returned his chum.

The people seemed to be of two kinds—dull, stolid folks of scant intelligence and those who looked to be, and were, highly intellectual. Later on they made the discovery that wealth in Venus was not reckoned by money or other worldly possessions but by what one knew.

"This will be your dwelling place for a time," said Pritexa, leading the three earth visitors into a red marble building between two constructed of

black onyx. "Your earth food will be brought to you shortly. I will see you in the morning. These men will show you about the place and look after you," and he indicated several middle-aged men, dressed entirely in red, who carried short wands.

"If ever we were in a jail we're in one now!" murmured Jack to his chum, as Pritexa turned to go out. "And if ever we were given in charge of keepers, these are the men," and he indicated those in red.

"They do look a bit like guards," agreed Mark. "I wonder what those sticks are for?"

They discovered a moment later, for several of the crowd from the street started to follow the earth visitors into the red buildng. There was a sharp exchange of talk between them and the men in red and when a big Venusian persisted in advancing one of the guards pointed his wand toward the fellow. In an instant he staggered back with a cry and appeared to be in great pain, though there was no sign of a wound.

"What happened?" cried Jack.

"Those are magnetic wands," explained Pritexa, turning back as he stood near the outer door. "They give off a repelling force that can be regulated by the holder. I suppose on your earth you would call them weapons of a sort."

"What did I tell you?" whispered Jack to his

chum. "We're prisoners all right, and these fellows in red are our guards!"

"Well, as long as they're human and not like those beastly red dwarfs of the City Beyond the Clouds, we may be able to stand it," Mark said. "They don't seem to mean us any harm," for the manner of the men in red was respectful.

"Well, we'll see what happens," Jack was saying when Professor Hertz called to Pritexa and asked:

"How are we to communicate with these men?" and he indicated those in red with the wands. "I know only a few words of Venusian." This was more or less of a subterfuge, but the professor did not want Pritexa to suspect that the plotting had been overheard.

"You can communicate with them by signs for the present," said the captain of the *Blue Streak*. "In a few days you will either become more proficient in our language or these men will have picked up enough English to understand what you say. Now rest and fear not. Your food will be here soon."

"Well, gentlemen, it looks as if we were here for a long stay," said the professor when the sky travelers were left alone in a large, well furnished room, like the main apartment of an exclusive club. It was fitted with easy chairs and tables.

"What can we do?" asked Mark.

"Have to make the best of it!" declared Jack. "That is, until we see a chance to escape. But it isn't half bad at that. Look here!"

He opened a door to disclose a well-arranged bedroom, out of which opened a luxurious bath with a sunken marble tub, filled with blue water and an elaborate shower.

"This is the life!" exclaimed Jack. "Let's see what these other doors open on."

He found several more bedrooms and baths, as well fitted as the first, and several other apartments, one evidently intended for a dining hall and the other for a kitchen, though there was no gas stove in it. However, there was an electrical device that Mark said probably was intended for a stove.

"Guess these Venusians don't bother much with cooking," remarked Jack.

"They don't have to, with their blue water and flower perfumes," said Mark. "I wonder——"

"Quiet! Somebody's coming!" warned his chum, as footsteps were heard echoing in the marble corridor outside.

CHAPTER XXI

WONDROUS SIGHTS

ONE of the red guards it was who had approached the closed door behind which Jack and his companions were freed for a time from the gaze of the curious Venusians. The man bowed respectfully when Professor Hertz swung open the door and murmured something in his own language.

"He says our grub is coming!" sang out Jack before he thought.

"Go easy!" advised Mark in a whisper. "We don't want them to know we're able to understand their talk!"

"That's so!" said Jack contritely. "Why can't I use a little sense?" he asked. "Well, anyhow, I guess we eat," he added, as he saw a number of men who seemed to be porters lined up in the hall behind the red guard with his curious wand weapon. They carried the familiar boxes of food that had been stored on the *Blue Streak* and also the valises of the young men and the professor.

"Now for a bath and some clean clothes!" cried Mark, when he saw his belongings. "And then, boy, I'm going to feed myself!"

"I think I can manage that electric stove," broke in Jack, motioning toward the room that seemed to be a kitchen. "I guess all the Venusians don't live on blue water and flower juice," he added as he went in and saw a number of pots, pans, dishes, and other utensils, generally the furniture of a well appointed kitchen.

With a bow and what seemed to be a friendly message, expressing a hope that they would find everything they wanted, the red guard withdrew after the porters had left, and the visitors to the planet were once more by themselves in their red prison.

"Now for a dip!" cried Jack, starting toward the bedroom and bath he had selected as his own.

The professor and Mark went to their baths and, a little later, attired in fresh garments, all gathered in the kitchen where, to Jack's delight, he found that he could easily operate the electric stove, which was not unlike those on earth except that the power came by wireless impulses.

"You shall now have your frankfurters and sauerkraut piping hot, Professor!" he called to the German.

"Good!" was the answer. "I feel better already!"

They were soon sitting down to a substantial meal, even if it consisted of canned or preserved food.

"It's like a picnic!" chuckled Jack, as he helped Mark to some more of the hot canned beans.

"Well, now we'll draw lots to see who washes the dishes," suggested Jack, after the meal which was eaten in the dining room.

"I hope you get the short one!" chuckled Mark. But that lot fell to him.

However, there was no need for either the young men or the professor, who offered to help, indulging in the "indoor sport of washing the dishes," for the meal was no sooner over than one of the red guards knocked at the door and brought in two elderly women and a rather more elderly man, and these, the red guard indicated by signs, would be the servants of the earth dwellers. The women at once began washing the dishes and clearing away the remains of the meal, while the man began making up the beds and laying out in proper shape the pajamas of the travelers.

"That red chap must have been spying on us," said Jack, when the guard had withdrawn, leaving the three servants at work.

"What makes you think so?" asked Mark.

"Because he had those kitchen canaries in to tackle the job as soon as we had finished eating. How did he know, if he wasn't watching us?"

and Jack looked around the room, searching for spy holes.

"Some of these Venusians are skilled in telepathy or thought transference," suggested Professor Hertz. "He may have learned our need of kitchen help in that way, after you young gentlemen talked of washing dishes."

"By golly!" cried Jack, "if they can read our thoughts like that, they'll know we know of their plans to hold us prisoners and that we are going to try to escape."

"They may," admitted Gustavus Hertz. "We can only to luck trust."

"Well, anyhow, let's enjoy this while we may," said Jack. "It's like living at a good hotel," he added; "that is, all but the food. Though I guess in some hotels you get more canned food than you think."

"Perhaps we can find here on Venus some food like that we are used to," suggested Mark. "It's a good bit like our earth."

"And not as hot as I expected to find it, considering that it's nearer the sun," said Professor Hertz. "But then this is night. When we are in the direct rays of the sun we may be more uncomfortable."

"That won't be for several hours," said Mark, looking at his watch and making some calculations. "The nights, like the days, on Venus, are

twice as long as ours, so we have a good sleep ahead of us."

"And I'm glad of it!" echoed Jack. "What with dodging shooting stars, getting out of the way of comets, and heading off meteors, we didn't have much rest on the *Blue Streak*. I'm going to make up for it now."

"I'm with you," agreed Mark. "What do you say, Professor?"

"I had an idea—I'm not very sleepy—I had an idea I would go out and walk around the city. There must be some curious things to see," was the answer.

"Well, don't get lost," advised Jack.

However, the scientist could not put his plan into operation, for when he tried the outer door it was locked. Nor did any of the red guards come in response to knocks and calls. It was evident that the prisoners were locked in for the night. But their prison was the most comfortable and luxurious that could have been devised.

Thus forced to give up his scheme of a night exploration of the city of Kar, Professor Hertz went to his room and the three earth dwellers were soon slumbering peacefully, being rather tired from the strain and anxiety of their marvelous trip through space.

Jack was awakened the next morning by the sound of running water and, lifting himself on

his elbow in bed, he saw their manservant of the night before filling the sunken marble tub. An agreeable perfume filled Jack's room.

"Is my bawth ready, James?" he drawled in fancied imitation of an English lord.

The Venusian came into the bedroom smiling and, pointing to the tub, said in English, but with a curious accent:

"Wash—you!"

"Crickity! He's learning our lingo!" cried Jack. "There's nothing slow about these Venusians!"

In turn the man made ready the baths of the professor and Mark and when they had dressed he insisted, by signs and a few English words, mingled with his own talk, on getting breakfast for them on the electric stove. The prisoners had griddle cakes, made from a patent flour, fried canned sausages, and coffee.

"As good a meal as we could get on earth!" chuckled Jack.

"And somebody to wash the dishes!" added Mark, as he saw the two old women who had entered the kitchen, evidently by some rear door as they had not passed through the dining room.

After breakfast Pritexa and Soli came, bringing a message from Gozona that she would see the earth dwellers later.

"How's that fellow who tried to choke me?" asked Jack.

"You mean Jantu? Oh, he has quite recovered now. He has had plenty of blue water and some strong Gasto," answered the captain. "But are you ready to accompany me now?" he asked.

"Where?" asked Jack, and he felt in his pocket to see that his automatic was in readiness.

"To view our city," was the somewhat unexpected answer. "Gozona suggested that you could, in that way, learn much about Venus and her people. You will be taken into many places, seeing our life, public, private, and scientific."

"I shall enjoy that last," observed the professor.

"Then come!" urged Pritexa and he led them out of their red prison.

Though but for the fact that some of the red guards preceded and also followed the party, there was no suggestion of captivity. No arms were in evidence save the wands of the men in red. But after the exhibition the earth dwellers had seen of the power of these simple sticks, they had no desire to do anything rash.

"We must bide our time," Professor Hertz had said, and the young men agreed with him.

Forth they were led into the streets of Kar and many wondrous sights they saw. Thought carriages were gliding or floating to and fro,

some well loaded and others containing but a single person. Some were evidently being used by the Venusian ladies going shopping as our ladies drive about the shopping districts of New York, Chicago, and other places in big automobiles. But there was no traffic congestion in Kar, and it was a wondrously quiet city. There was no tooting of auto horns, no rumble and roar of street cars, for there were none, and no distant elevated railroad squeaked the brakes of its cars.

"Did you ever see such beautiful flowers?" asked Jack.

"Never! Not even in the tropics," agreed Mark. "And see, they are eating them!" He pointed to some children who, after smilingly regarding the earth dwellers, picked and began chewing some bright red blossoms.

"I thought they only smelled the distilled perfumes as food," said Jack.

"You never can tell what children will do," said the professor, with a smile. "I must make some notes of what I see. I shall lecture on this when I get back to earth."

"If we ever do get back," murmured Jack in a low voice.

Piloted by Soli and Pritexa, the three went up one street and down another. They passed through great public triangles in which the government buildings were situated. They passed big

office buildings and modest homes, wandered through imposing churches, libraries, and museums and into beautiful flower gardens where musical fountains spurted blue water high into the air. Venus was a lovely place.

But like a canker in their hearts was that ever present thought that they were prisoners! Never for a moment did the Venusians let the earth dwellers out of their sight and the red guards were always on the alert.

Once they were caught in a crowd on one of the principal streets, and though the throng pressed close and its members were very curious, there was respect in the attitude of the Venusians.

Suddenly a man clad in a purple suit of what seemed to be silk, stepped out of a knot of people, as if impatient at the crowd and the delay. He made a peculiar motion with one hand, as though pushing himself away from the ground.

"Did you see that?" cried Jack, for he and his earth companions had beheld a most astonishing sight.

CHAPTER XXII

LIKE WILD ANIMALS

ALMOST as if some unseen power from above had bodily lifted the man in purple, his feet left the earth and, with a gentle, swaying motion, he floated over the heads of the throng. As serenely as though he were walking in the usual fashion, the man held himself in an upright position, turning his head from side to side and, now and then, looking down at those over whom he passed.

Nor did this most peculiar phenomenon cause any comment or excitement in the crowd, as far as the earth dwellers could ascertain. The people seemed to take it all as a matter of course, and Pritexa and his escort did not even glance at the floating man.

After a minute or two of thus sailing easily through the air, the man in purple descended gently to the earth in a cleared space beyond the crowd and walked along as he had been doing before.

Professor Hertz was hastily making notes in

a book he carried and in which he had begun to set down the various phenomena of Venus.

"What made that man float through the air that way?" asked Jack of Pritexa when they were free from the throng. There seemed to be no more purple-clad ones in the immediate vicinity. "Did he really do it or was there some trick?"

"He rose and progressed through the air by his own powers," was the answer. "He is what we Venusians call a 'zota,' or, as you would possibly say on your earth, a balloon-man. That is, he has within himself the power to negative the force of gravitation whenever he wishes. This enables him to rise in the air, to a limited distance, of course, and he can then progress freely by thought power, which you have seen move the little conveyance in which you were brought ashore from the island in the blue lake."

"But look here, old man," said Mark, waxing more genial than he really intended in the excitement over this remarkable information, "do you mean to say that this chap can rise in the air and pass over the heads of a crowd, or over any other obstruction, whenever he wishes?"

"Surely!" answered the captain of the *Blue Streak*. "Why not? He is a zota."

"Can any one acquire this power?" asked Jack. "If they can, I'm going in for it."

Pritexa shook his head.

"It is not given to every one," he said, "though all those of the higher intellectual class on Venus are eligible to it. But it takes years of study and thought concentration to bring it about. Not many will devote the years necessary nor suffer the rigors attendant upon its acquisition. When we were captives of your Gypsies," he went on, "they told us about certain holy men in India, Yogi, I think they were called, who, by long years of fasting, thought, and isolation have brought their minds to a place where they have power over the body.

"It is so with our zotas. Their minds control their bodies and they have but to wish themselves floating in the air and it is done. There are not many of them among us and, in honor of their powers, they are attired in purple, being the only class allowed to wear that color."

"I've heard about being born to the purple," said Mark, "but these zotas get it by hard work. It's a great power to have."

Once more, as they were escorted through the crowded streets to be shown the sights of Kar, the earth dwellers saw another purple zota. He wished to pass from one street to another without going around a long block, it was evident. For he suddenly made that same spurning motion with his hand toward the earth and at once rose and floated over the tops of some buildings that

were evidently in his way. Over their roofs he went for some distance before the travelers saw him start to descend.

"Well, can you beat that?" cried Jack.

"Not with anything we have on our planet," replied Mark.

"This is most remarkable!" murmured the professor, making more notes in his book. "If it were not for the fate that hangs over us I should begin to enjoy my stay on Venus," he added in a low voice, intended for the ears of Mark and Jack alone.

"Yes," Mark agreed, "it isn't very pleasant to know that we are prisoners."

"I suggest," said Jack, "that we put it up to these fellows," and he indicated by a motion of his head Pritexa, Soli and the red guards. "Make them put their cards on the table and tell us whether or not we are free to go when we please. As it is now, we only guess at it."

"I'm afraid it is true enough," replied the professor. "If we ask for a show-down, they might treat us harshly. As it is now, we are practically free to see and study Venus and the Venusians."

"But we want to go back to earth some time!" argued Mark.

"It will be time enough after we have been here a little longer," answered Professor Hertz. "There are many scientific things I want to in-

vestigate. After that we will request that we be allowed to depart. And, if they will not let us go, we can then consider what to do."

"I think Gozona is our best channel," remarked Jack. "She's very friendly toward us. She appreciates the fact that we saved their lives by making it possible for them all to get back here."

"Yes, Gozona will help us—if she can," and the professor added the last three words after a pause.

A moment later he hastily thrust his notebook into his pocket and tried to squeeze in between Mark and Jack as they were crossing a street.

"What's the matter?" Jack asked.

"It's that woman—the one who claims I am her husband!" the scientist whispered. "Don't let her see me! She's terrible!"

The young men saw in the crowd ahead of them the unfortunate woman who claimed Gustavus Hertz as her missing mate. But his ruse in keeping between Jack and Mark was successful and he was not seen by her.

"Thank goodness!" the German murmured, as they passed around a corner.

The next few days were busy ones in which the earth dwellers were treated like visitors of distinction and taken to view the various sights and industries of Venus. In some respects things

were like those on our earth, but there were many improvements and advantages in business and industry practiced by the Venusians.

Then, one morning, the change came. Jack and his two companions had just finished breakfast in the "red jail," as they called it, when Pritexa and Soli came in. Pritexa's manner seemed different.

"Come!" he said shortly.

"Where?" asked the professor, struck by the change in tone.

"You are to be exhibited in the schools for the benefit of the pupils who, this term, begin the study of your earth," was the answer. "You will tell them all you can about it. I will translate what you say. You are to be shown in the schools."

"You mean put on exhibition like wild beasts?" asked Mark indignantly.

"Those are my orders," replied Pritexa. "They are also the orders of the Queen. Come at once!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MOUNTAIN OF FIRE

For a moment the three captives—they were now certain of their status—stood looking at the two Venusians. The manner of Soli and Pritexa had undergone a distinct change. Gone was their polite bearing. They were now more like keepers in a prison.

Jack Darrow, Mark Sampson and Gustavus Hertz looked at one another, and a common understanding was reached. The time had come to put the matter to a test. With nods, Mark and Jack indicated that the professor was to speak for them.

"Suppose," he began, "that we refuse to allow ourselves to be shown, like captive beasts, in your schools. I should not mind giving scientific information to any body of students," he added; "but I strongly resent being compelled to do it."

"Resent or not, as you wish, you must do as you are told," said Pritexa coldly.

"And if we refuse and support our refusal with

force?" asked the professor and, as he spoke, his hand went to his pocket where he had a loaded automatic. Mark and Jack also made motions toward theirs.

As though anticipating this, though he may not have fully realized the significance of it, Pritexa called out something in his own language. In an instant, and before the earth dwellers could draw their weapons, three of the men in red suddenly appeared and pointed their wands at the prisoners.

Mark, Jack and Professor Hertz could not refrain from exclamations—involuntary gasps of surprise they were, rather than pain. From each of the three extended wands there seemed to flow some strange, weird power, like an electrical current, which entered the bodies of the three earth-born and rendered them helpless. They stood there, unable to move hand or foot.

For several seconds the red guards remained pointing their wands at the prisoners and then, with a smile that had in it mingled malice and triumph, Pritexa uttered a word of command. The wands were lowered and it felt to the three that an awful mental and physical pressure was suddenly removed.

"That is how we control those not of Venus," said Pritexa slowly. "If you resist or refuse to be exhibited in the schools, you will be taken

there in the state from which you have just been released. It is for you to choose."

"It seems we have no choice!" murmured Jack.

"No, you have not!" said the captain sharply.

"Well, I like your nerve!" burst out Mark, not caring whether the slang was understood or appreciated by the Venusians. "After we risked our lives to fix up your broken ship and help you get back to your planet you treat us like dogs! Are all Venusians without honor?"

"I am sorry, but it is necessary that you go with us. You will not be treated discourteously. It is for the benefit of science that you be shown before the school children and tell them of your earth."

"It isn't that we mind telling what we know," repeated the professor. "It is the manner in which we are ordered about. You might as well put us in iron cages like the animals in a menagerie and invite the crowds in to view us."

"I am regretful if you feel that way about it," said Pritexa stiffly. "But it must be as I have said."

"All right, gentlemen," said Professor Hertz, with a philosophical shrug of his shoulders as he looked at Mark and Jack, "I suppose we had better go."

Under other circumstances the earth visitors might have enjoyed their stay on Venus, and even

going about from school to school would not have been unpleasant had they not been taken by force as they were, and under threats of bodily harm. For both the professor and the young men were fond of children and would have done anything to advance their interests. Also they would have been glad to impart knowledge, as they were getting valuable scientific data in return. But it was very galling under the circumstances.

Escorted by Pritexa, Soli, and the red guards, the prisoners were shown in one school after another. Their standing among the citizens of Kar seemed to have changed since the first days of their arrival. Then they were treated with respect, now looks and words of contempt seemed to follow them.

"The school kids aren't so bad, though," said Jack after they had visited several institutions of learning and had been stood up on the platforms to be gazed at and talked over. "They're just like those on our earth."

"They seem of a little higher intelligence," said Professor Hertz who had at one time been a school master. "They seem to have a quicker grasp of scientific facts."

"Well, these Venusians are away ahead of us in science," said Jack, "so that's only natural."

"There was one little imp in that last school we visited," said Mark when they were in a

thought wagon being taken to a distant institution in the suburbs of Kar. "He pinched my arm hard when he was being paraded past us with the rest of the class. I wanted to cuff him, but I didn't dare."

"He probably wanted to see if you were alive," chuckled Jack.

"Do I look so like a dead one?" Mark asked, with a show of indignation. "The next time I'll cuff any one who pinches me!"

"Better not," warned Professor Hertz. "I think the temper of the populace, as well as that of Pritexa and his allies, is turning against us. They aren't as cordial as they were."

"I've noticed that," said Jack. "I wonder why?"

They were talking among themselves in such low tones, seated as they were in the rear of the thought wagon, that they did not think Pritexa, who was in front guiding the vehicle, could hear them.

"I fancy they resent our presence on Venus," said the professor. "And I have another idea, but it is so terrible I hesitate to speak of it."

"You mean we are in danger?" asked Mark.

"Yes, and I fear grave danger. I overheard some talk last night among the red guards which leads me to believe that after we have been sufficiently exhibited and when they have learned

from us all we can tell, that we are to be sacrificed!"

"Sacrificed!" gasped Jack. "What do you mean?"

"Last night I heard the red guards saying something about a mountain of sacrifice, and I think they connected us with it."

"We've got to watch out!" said Jack. "I'll shoot to kill as soon as I see any motions toward a sacrifice!" he added.

"If possible," said the professor significantly.

After having visited some of the lower schools they were taken to an imposing institution. It was built in a large triangular park and was a three-cornered affair of red, blue and yellow. On the top was a triangular tower of gray glass.

"Our most famous college," explained their guide. "Be careful of what you speak when in there. Many there can read your thoughts."

Over a hundred learned looking men and women came to look at the earth inhabitants and ask them questions in words they could not understand. When these words were interpreted they answered as best they could. Some of the men and women wore curious suits of silk and gold and silver but others had only flowing robes of either white or blue. There was a small fountain in each room visited, a fountain that gave off a deli-

cate odor and from which the men and women frequently drank.

The ordeal here was severe and the young men and the professor were glad when it was at an end. They came out into the fresh air somewhat dazed.

"It is their thought concentrations," explained the professor. "It touches our minds and mixes us up. It is infernal."

Before long they were in a thought wagon once more and now the outfit was turned in the direction of Kar.

They were now traveling over a pretty open country—the suburbs of the city. Suddenly the course of the floating vehicle was changed. It passed over a piece of woodland and in the distance loomed a mountain, the crown of which was wreathed in smoke. As they came nearer to it the travelers could see that it was a mountain of fire, yellow flames mingling with the brown smoke that issued from the summit.

"It's a volcano!" cried Mark.

"Yes, and it looks as if that sacrifice idea was going to be carried out here and now!" yelled Jack. "We're heading right for it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE UNDERGROUND DUNGEON

For a moment it seemed as if Pritexa and the red guards were going to bring the lives of the three earth dwellers to a sudden and terrible end, for the thought carriage continued on toward the smoking mountain of yellow fire. Its heat now began to be felt.

"What does this mean?" indignantly asked Professor Hertz, tapping the shoulder of the captain who sat in front with Soli beside him. "You assured us that our lives would be safe. I thought the people of Venus had at least the instincts of savages. There, when one has partaken of salt, the law of hospitality is sacred."

"Plug him through the back and let's end this all!" cried Jack in desperation, as they were impelled nearer and nearer to the mountain of fire. "Draw your gun, Professor Hertz, and plug him!"

"That's what I say!" cried Mark, and he reached toward his weapon.

The earth-born were desperate, and if ever

there was a time for precipitate action it seemed now. Even the usually calm German-American was almost ready to take a terrible chance on escaping from the threatening danger by killing those who seemed bent on sacrificing the lives of the earth dwellers.

But as before, even while they reached for their weapons, they were rendered helpless by the powerful impulses that emanated from the wands in the hands of the red guards. Though they did not turn around to see, Mark, Jack and the professor felt the sticks being pointed at them and were held as spellbound as in a dream.

"You see you are helpless against us," said Pritexa, with a mocking smile. He had made no gesture of defense.

So under the spell of the wands were the three that they could not even speak.

"You shall now have a further exhibition of my power," went on the captain of the *Blue Streak*.

He spoke a few words to Soli and then addressed the red guards. A moment later the course of the thought wagon was changed and it began to descend toward the ground, though at the same time it was nearer the blazing mountain which was, in fact, an active volcano.

An instant later the full extent of the terror to which they were to be subjected was evident.

As the thought wagon neared the ground, Pritexa, Soli, and the red guards leaped lightly off and ran toward a large rock which they mounted.

"Come on, let's get out!" cried Jack, and he was about to follow the example of the others and drop off when the thought wagon suddenly veered upward, like a sharply zooming airplane, and in an instant it was so high that it would have been madness for the three passengers to leap.

Now, again, the vehicle, guided as it must have been by the powerful thought currents emanating from the brain of Pritexa on the rock, again surged toward the mountain of fire.

"This is the end!" said the professor solemnly.

"Looks like it!" gasped Jack, for now the heat was terrific. "But what an awful death to die!"

"Those are fiends back there!" cried Mark, looking back at the Venusians on the rock who were calmly regarding the progress of the earth dwellers on the thought wagon. "Fiends! Worse than the red dwarfs, because more intelligent."

"They are going to send us right over the volcano!" shouted Jack. "Come on! Jump! It is better to die that way than to fall into that pit of yellow flame!" and he pointed to the crater of the fiery mountain which they were rapidly approaching.

He might have carried out his desperate in-

tention and the others might have followed his example, had not Mark suddenly observed that the thought carriage was swinging around in a wide arc that would take it away from the burning mountain.

"Wait! Don't jump!" yelled Mark. "I think we're going to be saved by those rascals after all!"

"For a worse fate, maybe!" groaned Jack. They were in desperate straits because of the terrific heat.

"There can be nothing much worse than what was before us," said the professor solemnly.

The queer vehicle was now swinging away from the mountain and gliding back, like a boomerang, to the rock on which stood the Venusians.

"Whew!" gasped Mark, wiping the sweat from his face. "Even a little temporary relief is welcome!"

But the relief seemed to be permanent, for the thought wagon continued its flight away from the mountain and a little later came to a gentle stop beside the rock on which Pritexa and Soli stood.

"You have had a taste of my power and the power of my friends," said the captain, with an enigmatic smile, as he again took his place in front. "It will not be wise to trifle with us."

"You're a fiend!" said Jack, under his breath.

"You cannot expect us to be very willing help-

ers in your efforts to impart information to your school children, when you treat us in this manner," observed the professor.

"It was necessary to impress you and to teach you the futility of trying to escape," said Pritexa. "I would not have suffered you to come to actual harm. But you must know that we can project our thought power for you or against you without being actually near you. As you have seen, I can control this vehicle whether I am in or out of it. Be guided accordingly."

"Then, are we really prisoners on Venus?" asked Jack.

"Not prisoners in the sense that you will be confined," said the captain, with a smile. "You are free to come and go, within limits, and we wish to make such use of you as will advance science."

"But are we prisoners in the sense that we will not be allowed to go back to earth?" asked Mark.

"There is time enough to talk of that later," was the evasive reply. "Now we shall continue on to the country schools. They are in need of authentic information about your earth. You must give it to them."

Helpless, the three visitors could do nothing but allow themselves to be taken wherever the Venusians wished. Once more they were journeying through the air in the thought wagon and they

soon arrived at a suburban town where they were taken into a large school.

Once more the same scenes were enacted, the earth ones answering questions which Pritexa translated. The children were orderly and well behaved and seemed eager to learn.

The journey back to Kar was by a route which did not take them near the dangerous, burning mountain, and for this the visitors were grateful. But when they were left alone in their red prison that night, then, indeed, they gave way to what was almost despair.

"We're nothing but miserable prisoners, and that's all there is to it!" cried Jack.

"Slaves would be a better word!" declared Mark.

"Don't give up so easily," suggested Professor Hertz, who was in a little better spirits. "Let's eat and then consider some plan of relief."

"What's the use of eating?" asked Jack gloomily. "The sooner we die the sooner we'll end this misery."

"Better to die of starvation than in some terrible way like that at the mountain of fire," added Mark.

"I am not ready to admit that I am going to die," said the prisoner. "I am going to appeal to Gozona."

"How can we reach her?" asked Mark. "We

have not seen her since these rascals really admitted that we were in their power and that we were being held prisoners. She seems to have avoided us."

"That's right," agreed Jack. "How are we going to let her know what a pickle she got us into?"

"I have a plan," said the German. "It may be a mad scheme and it may not work, but it is worth trying. You have seen how powerful thought is on Venus. The vehicle we traveled in to-day is an example. It seems that the minds of the Venusians are particularly receptive, like a sensitive radio set. Perhaps if we all concentrate and wish very hard that Gozona should come to us, she may get our thought message and come here to save us."

"Here to this red prison?" asked Jack.

"Yes," replied the professor. "It will do no harm to try."

"Suppose Pritexa intercepts our message to her?" asked Mark.

"I think he cannot do that," replied the scientist. "The thoughts directed to the brain of one cannot enter the brain of another. Come, let us concentrate in willing that Gozona comes to us. And let us do it speedily."

"Here goes!" murmured Jack, and, sitting down, he closed his eyes and began to concentrate.

The others did the same, all desire for food passing from them.

After about an hour of strained silence on the part of the prisoners there came a soft tapping at their door and a moment later the beautiful girl in blue entered.

"There! What did I tell you?" cried the German-born scientist.

"Hush! Quiet!" murmured Gozona, her finger to her lips. "I risk much in coming here, but I have come to save you!"

"Are we in danger?" asked Mark.

"Deadly danger! Had I known what was in store for you, rather would I have perished on your earth than have brought you back here to save our lives. But now I will save you if I can."

"Just ask Pritexa and his gang to let us have the *Blue Streak* and we'll navigate her back to earth!" said Mark.

"The men are too strong for me," replied Gozona. "I have pleaded with them not to humiliate you so, but to no end. They heed me no more. They say I favor you too much. So what I do I must do in secrecy."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jack, as he saw her walk toward an angle in the wall of the main room.

"I am going to help you escape," she whis-

pered. "But to do so you must brave terrible perils. Are you brave enough?"

"We'll do anything to get away from here," said Mark.

"Then follow me."

Gozona pressed on a place in the wall and after a moment there was a grating sound and a large stone slid back, revealing an opening leading to a flight of steps.

"Come, and make no noise," whispered the girl in blue.

They followed, guided by Gozona, who carried a queer, glowing tube of blue fire. The steps went down about thirty feet and at the bottom the prisoners looked around. They found themselves in a damp, underground dungeon, on the walls of which were rusty shackles, indicating, all too plainly, the use to which it had been put.

For a moment Jack and his companions looked at Gozona doubtingly. Had she led them from the red prison into a worse place of confinement?

In the silence they could hear the dripping of water on stone. Then, suddenly, the blue light went out and they were in thick blackness.

CHAPTER XXV

SNAKES OF GLASS

INSTINCTIVELY the three escaping prisoners grasped the automatic pistols without which, of late, they never ventured forth. It was a matter of surprise to them that the weapons had not been taken from them. But in this the Venusians may not have been as clever as they were in other ways.

"Keep together!" called Jack to his companions. "If this is a trick on the part of Pritexa——"

The gentle voice of Gozona broke though the darkness.

"You need have no fear," she said. "Pritexa is not here. I hope he does not know what I am doing to save you. If he did it would be the end of everything. I have merely put out the light to be able better to look back and see if we are followed."

"Oh, excuse me!" murmured Jack, and he felt ashamed of his suspicions.

"Quiet, please," urged the girl in blue, speaking in a low voice.

They remained in the black solitude, unilluminated by a single ray of light—it was like a curtain of black velvet over them—and the only sound was that ceaseless drip of water. They were probably below the level of the blue lake, in an underground dungeon designed for the secret punishment of prisoners.

"No one seems to be following us," said Gozona, still in that low but penetrating voice. "There is no gleam of light."

"Won't those red guards see the hole in the wall that we came through?" asked Mark.

"The stone slid back into place when we reached the bottom of the steps," explained Gozona. "It cannot be opened from this side and few on the other side know its secret."

The strange, weird, blue light once more illuminated the underground stone passage and the three prisoners looked hastily around before advancing under the leadership of their beautiful guide. It was evidently the corridor to a series of dungeons and cells carved out of the solid rock.

"How did you happen to come to save us?" asked Jack, as he stumbled along over the uneven, rocky pavement.

"You called to me, did you not?" asked Gozona simply.

"Then you received our thought message?" inquired the professor.

"Surely! Why not? It came as plainly as if you had spoken the words. But I have had it in mind for some time—ever since I learned of the sordid actions of Pritexa and Soli—to do something for you. At first I remonstrated with these men, but they laughed at me. They said you were in their power and they were going to make use of you to enrich themselves."

"And after all we did for them—repairing the *Blue Streak* and helping them navigate her here!" exclaimed Mark.

"They are ungrateful," agreed Gozona. "But many Venusians are like that after their curiosity wears off. They do not like strangers. They are jealous of them. Once they obtain from you all the information you can give them for scientific purposes, they will discard you."

"Do you think Pritexa intends to sacrifice us to the volcano?" asked Jack.

"He is cruel enough to do that," admitted Gozona. "But before that he planned to show you to our Queen who has heard about you. She is very fond of novelties, and, so Pritexa thinks, would pay a large sum to see you and hear your account of the earth. After you have been sufficiently shown in the schools, Pritexa planned to take you to the royal palace."

"And after that, the volcano, I suppose?" suggested Mark.

"Or perhaps he would put us in cages like wild beasts and tour the country with us," added Jack.

"He is capable of anything," admitted Gozona, in a low voice. "His sense of power and control over you has gone to his head, I suppose."

"Do you think it is possible to get away from him?" asked Mark.

"I will do my best to help you," was the reply. "But in the main it lies with yourselves. I can only point out the way. Yes, it is possible, or I should not try to help you."

"Can we have the *Blue Streak* to fly back to earth with?" asked Jack eagerly.

"It is my intention to lead you to the ship," answered the girl in blue. "It has been fitted up for a new venture into space and stands on the island in the blue lake ready for a flight. If you can reach it, and know how to manage the machinery, you may get back to your earth."

"Put us on board and we'll work the machinery all right!" exclaimed Mark.

"It will be too bad to leave Venus without getting more scientific data," lamented Professor Hertz, "but I suppose it cannot be helped."

"The earth is good enough for me," stated Mark. "But where are we going now, Gozona?" he asked. For the tunnel among the dungeons

seemed to be leading downward into the earth, ever deeper and deeper.

"We must pass under the city," she said, "in order to come out on the shore of the lake opposite the island where the *Blue Streak* is in readiness for flight."

"I hope the end of this tunnel isn't blocked," remarked Jack as he noticed the solidity of the rocky walls. "It would take a lot of dynamite to get us out of here if it isn't open." The cells and dungeons that had been observed on either side of the passage had disappeared. They were now proceeding along a rough-hewn tunnel through the solid rock.

"I think the end will be open," said Gozona. "These prisons were used to confine captives taken in war. They were brought across the blue lake and led through this passage to the various cells. But we of Venus have long since given up war. So these dungeons have not been used for several hundred years. I discovered them by accident in studying the history of Kar and investigated them alone. I believe I am the only one who knows their secret. I have kept it to myself, thinking I might some day have a use for this knowledge. I am glad now to use it to serve those who helped me," she said, with a smile. "For I wanted, very much, to get back to Venus. I could not have lived on your earth, lovely as you think it."

"Well, we're glad you knew about this place," said Jack. "For it certainly is good to get away from Pritexa and his gang."

"You are not free yet," Gozona reminded him, as she hastened along, followed by the three. "The worst is yet to come. There are strange enemies to contend with. They nearly killed me. If you have any weapons for defense——"

She paused, as if knowing of the hidden automatics.

"We have these!" exclaimed Jack, drawing his weapon.

"You may need it. Have it in readiness," she said earnestly.

Wondering what was before them, they pressed on.

The tunnel suddenly opened into a vast chamber, and on reaching the place where it began the echoes of their footsteps were accompanied by a strange, hissing, shuffling sound.

"Here you will need all your courage," said Gozona. "Look and see through what you must pass to gain your freedom!"

She suddenly increased the illuminating power of the blue torch so that the vast cavern was brightly lighted. In the gleam the cause of the hissing, shuffling sounds were made plain.

"Snakes! Snakes!" yelled Mark, in horror. "Look at 'em!"

"And such snakes!" gasped Jack. "Why, they're made of glass!" and he pointed with a shaking hand.

"There is nothing on our earth like this!" exclaimed the professor. The prisoners, led by Gozona, stood on the edge of a vast, rocky pit of transparent serpents—great snakes the slimy bodies of which could be looked through as though they were long, cylindrical windows. The ugly creatures were twining and writhing over one another, hissing, with their fangs darting in and out. Their hard scales rasped noisily as they glided to and fro.

It was when some of the serpents raised themselves up, like hooded cobras, that their glass-like property was made manifest. The prisoners could look right through the bodies of the snakes in the foreground and see the mass of serpents writhing beyond.

"Saw ever man the like!" murmured the professor.

"Look out!" yelled Jack, drawing his automatic. "They're coming for us!"

CHAPTER XXVI

SPIDERS WITH HORNS

ATTRACTED either by the glare of the blue light or by the presence of the prisoners and their lovely guide in their den, the glass snakes seemed stirred into great activity. Several of them began gliding toward a little ledge above the floor of their den on which the four stood.

Jack had spoken truly when he said the serpents were preparing to attack, but not until the first of the reptiles had come close to the ledge did the full horror of their position dawn upon the fugitives. When the professor and the two young scientists saw the great size of the creatures their hearts were as though turned to water within them.

"Back! Back!" cried Mark who, more than either of his companions, had a deadly horror of snakes. "We can't pass through this den of serpents!"

"It is the only way to freedom," said Gozona. "Use your weapons on them. You must cut a path through them to reach the continuation of

the tunnel that leads to the shore of the blue lake. You must kill enough of these snakes to terrify the others and then flee past them."

"No wonder she asked us if we were ready to brave terrible peril!" murmured Jack. "This is awful!"

"Hurry!" urged the girl. "They will be upon us in a moment! You must fight the snakes!"

"That's right!" yelled Jack. "We've been in as tight a jam as this before. Come on! Shoot!"

The foremost of the serpents were now at the little raised ledge on which the imperiled ones stood. One of the largest of the creatures reared itself up and fairly flung itself at the professor. He was over to one side and, as the snake reared its ugly length, the crystal fangs flashing in and out, Mark and Jack had a sight of their scientific friend viewed as through a thick glass bottle, which distorted him most grotesquely.

Mark fired at the head of the serpent, now rearing several feet above the professor, and the bullet found its mark. With a hiss like the safety valve of a steam engine popping off, the snake, with a terrible convulsive motion, slithered back among the others. It seemed to collapse as does a punctured balloon.

"They're partly filled with air!" cried Jack. "That's what makes them look so big and trans-

parent. Maybe they're not as deadly as they seem."

"They are deadly enough!" warned Gozona. "Kill as many as you can."

Then began a nerve-racking and awful fight with the snakes of glass. A great mass of the serpents surged forward, following the report of Mark's automatic and the convulsive writhing back into their midst of the body of the wounded one. The professor and Jack now began shooting, aiming at those serpents which sought to crawl up on the ledge to reach them.

"Fire at their heads!" yelled Mark above the horrible hissing. "That seems to get them!"

"Right you are!" shouted Jack.

What appeared to be the king of all those horrid serpents suddenly leaped out of the crawling, writhing mass and launched a horrible, hissing head at Gozona. Brave as she was, she gave a little cry of horror and held the blue light in front of her protectingly.

The great snake, through whose body Jack had a glimpse of the girl's terrorized face, was about to strike when he pulled the trigger of his automatic and sent the bullet into a vital spot.

Again came that terrible hiss as of escaping air, and the serpent's undulating form collapsed in folds at the girl's feet.

But there were so many of the snakes that it

seemed hopeless to kill only a few. Shot after shot was sent among them, but still the great, hissing reptiles slithered forward over the bodies of their dead. Luckily the prisoners had several clips of cartridges with them, so they could reload their automatics a number of times or the battle might have ended against them in the very beginning.

Just as Jack slipped his third clip of cartridges into his weapon he saw a great serpent that had somehow or other got back of the professor, rear up and start to coil about the scientist.

"Look out!" yelled the young man, for he well knew the terrible constricting power of a large snake. It can crush to pulp every bone in the body of a great bull in less than a minute.

Jack fired, once more observing the curious effect of looking right through the transparent snake at the form of the scientist. The speeding bullet reached a vital spot only just in time. Another moment would have been too late.

"This is awful!" cried Mark. "I—I can't stand much more!"

"You have to!" cried Jack. "Brace up, old man! Give them another round!"

He kept his finger on the trigger of his automatic and the remaining bullets spat out in rapid succession as he moved the barrel to spray the lead into the midst of the writhing snakes. Tak-

ing heart, Mark did the same, and the professor followed their example when he had recovered from his fright at his near escape from death. Thus a number of the glass snakes were quickly killed.

Meanwhile Gozona held her place on the ledge, keeping the blue torch elevated above her head to give the others a better light by which to see to shoot. Once or twice, when the attention of the escaping prisoners was directed elsewhere, great snakes seemed to menace the girl and again, as Jack killed one striking at him, he had a glimpse of Gozona leaping over a serpent that struck at her legs. Her bravery was contagious, and without her example the terrified fugitives might not have been bold enough to keep up the fight.

At last the death dealing bullets, or perhaps the noise and the smoke, so disconcerted the remaining serpents that they began gliding away. At first only a few retreated, but at length the whole mass turned tail and crawled into unseen holes and dens.

"There they go!" cried Jack. "We've beaten 'em back!"

"It seems so," agreed Mark, in a faint voice. "And none too soon!"

"Quick!" cried Gozona. "There is no time to lose! We must cross this place! Beyond it the serpents will not come. Hurry!"

"Then we'll be safe once we are past this den," said the professor.

"There are still other dangers," replied the girl in blue. "We must hasten. The time is growing short!"

Save for the collapsed bodies of the dead glass snakes, which now looked more like skins than like rounded serpents, the floor of the den was clear. Stepping over the loathsome reptiles, the four now made their way deeper into the depths of the earth.

Once more they were in a long, rocky cavern and again they heard the faint sound of dripping water.

"Hurrah!" suddenly cried Jack, who was walking beside Gozona. "I see daylight ahead!"

He pointed to something shimmering white in the blue light of the torch. Professor Hertz and Mark saw it, too, and began to rejoice that the end of their terrible trip underground now lay before them. But they rejoiced too soon.

"Be careful!" warned the girl in blue, when Jack would have rushed forward. "There is yet danger!"

A moment later he appreciated the reason for her caution.

What he saw gleaming white in the blue torch glare was not the end of the tunnel opening into day. It was the light reflected from thousands

of huge, festooned spider webs attached to the walls and ceiling of the tunnel.

Like ropes in thickness were the strands of the webs. For a moment the prisoners could scarcely believe their eyes. It did not seem possible that any living spiders could spin such immense webs as these. Yet they were, unmistakably, cobwebs!

"It is not true! It cannot be!" murmured the amazed German-born scientist.

"They're webs, all right," said Jack. "But where are the spiders?"

"Look! Look!" cried Mark, with horror in his voice, and he covered his eyes with his hands.

Suddenly the festooned webs were alive with great, blotchy spiders—spiders prancing toward them on long, arched legs—spiders with great, protruding eyes—spiders running up and down the cablelike webs—and, worst of all, spiders with great horns, like the claws of immense crabs, horns that they moved and clashed before their unblinking eyes as they swung on pendulous webs toward the escaping prisoners.

"This is the end!" murmured Jack. "This is too awful to live through."

CHAPTER XXVII

ABOARD ONCE MORE

Horror and fear halted the professor and his companions. Never had they beheld such a terrifying sight. This was not the first, by many times, that they had been in deadly peril. But there was something awful and terrifying about those horned spiders. Their very size—at least two feet in diameter through the body—was enough to terrorize any one, and with their clashing horns and great, protruding eyes, the sight of them, swinging on ever-spinning webs, was enough to stagnate the blood and shatter the strongest nerves.

"Go on! Go on!" cried Gozona. "The exit from the tunnel lies beyond these horned spiders. Go on! It is death to linger!"

"We cannot pass them!" cried Mark, taking his shaking hands down from his eyes. "It is too horrible!"

"We must pass them!" said the girl. As before, when confronted by the glass snakes, she seemed

to keep her poise and nerve. "You must destroy them as you destroyed the serpents!"

Some of the spiders nearest the prisoners were swinging to and fro on the ends of long, single webs as though to acquire momentum enough to reach the party of terror-stricken ones on the edge of their forest of tangled strands. At one of these Jack Darrow aimed and fired. The bullet sped true and the ugly creature dropped to the floor of the cavern, foam coming from its mouth and the horns clattering in a terrible manner.

No sooner had this one hideous creature dropped from its web than a dozen others dropped from theirs, fell upon their late companion, and began pulling the body apart and devouring it with their ghastly mouths.

"That's one way to save ourselves!" cried the professor. "Kill a few, and while the others are eating the bodies they will be so occupied that perhaps we can pass through them."

Thereupon they began firing their few remaining cartridges while Gozona held the blue light to enable them to see. As in the first instance, as soon as one spider was killed a dozen of its mates began to devour it.

"Break down their webs!" cried Gozona, taking up what seemed to be a piece of petrified tree branch from the floor of the cavern. "As soon as a web is destroyed the spiders start weaving

it again. In this way we may take their attention from us."

"That is a good plan, too," agreed the professor as he realized how few cartridges they had left. He caught up a petrified branch, one of many scattered about the cavern.

While Jack kept firing, killing several more of the horrible, blotchy spiders, Mark and the professor, with Gozona using one hand to wield a branch, swept down web after web, making a path through which they might pass in comparative safety. The girl had spoken truly. No sooner was a web torn down than the occupant of it began spinning it anew and in this way the attention of many of the spiders was taken from the party of fugitives.

"Be careful!" warned Gozona. "Their bite is deadly. But they seldom attack except when swinging from the end of a web-strand. They will not jump on you or crawl on you from the ground."

Fortunately, the fugitives had reached the den of spider webs at a place where the maze was comparatively narrow. So when they had literally swept their way through about ten feet, they came out beyond the infested place and into a long, narrow part of the underground passage.

"If there are any more of these horned spiders and glass snakes, I'll give up!" gasped Mark,

with a break in his voice. "This is the most awful experience I've ever had!"

"It is terrible!" agreed Jack. "But we are still alive!"

"What lies beyond?" asked the professor of Gozona, and even his strong nerves seemed on the verge of being shattered.

"You have passed the worst dangers of this dungeon," answered the girl in blue. "Your perils are now from men like yourselves—from Pritexa and his fellows."

"Are they out there?" asked Jack, pointing ahead.

"Not now, I hope," answered the girl. "But they may be soon. In a little while I hope to direct you to the shore of the lake, in the middle of which, as you know, is the landing island. There is the *Blue Streak;* unattended, I think you will find."

"Once we get aboard we'll be all right," said Jack heartily.

"Unless Pritexa stops you," said the girl. "And he surely will do so if he discovers your escape. However, I hope he will not. He does not dream of this underground passage beneath the city. Now hasten!"

They hurried on through the tunnel, guided by the girl with the blue torch. She was now ahead, and they saw her come to a sudden stop.

"I wonder what it is now?" murmured Mark. "Tigers with two heads or lions with eight feet?"

However, it proved to be a deep and wide stream of black, swiftly flowing water. When they looked at its swift current and sinister depths even Jack, who was an expert swimmer, gave a little shudder.

"It's too wide to jump," he said, for the farther shore, many feet away, could be seen in the glare of the torch. "And I don't fancy doing the crawl stroke in there."

"Looks as if we were stumped!" muttered Mark.

But Gozona did not appear disturbed. She was walking up and down the rocky shore, moving her torch to and fro as if searching for something.

"There should be one here," she murmured. "Though it is many years since I have seen it."

"What?" asked Jack.

"A thought carriage," answered the girl. "Only in that can we cross this underground stream. It is infected with eels that can shock you to death."

"Electric eels!" cried the professor. "I should like to see one!"

As if in answer to his wish, the head of some horrid water creature was thrust up out of the black stream. It looked like a snake and regarded the four with baleful green eyes before sinking beneath the surface. They had a glimpse

of a glistening green body—eel-like in shape—the tail ending in a curious ribbed formation.

"There is one!" murmured Gozona. "A touch of that tail is death!"

"Then I don't go in swimming!" said Jack.

"There is no need!" the girl suddenly exclaimed. "Here it is—the thought wagon!" She pointed to a dilapidated specimen of the queer conveyance. It was large enough to hold them all and they at once took their places on the seats.

"I hope she doesn't try to use it like a boat," said Jack. "It will set too low in the water."

"Are you going to float it across in the air, Gozona?" asked Mark.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "I have that power."

Gozona concentrated and stiffened herself and immediately the little cart rose from the rocky shore and began floating through the air and across the underground stream. The blue torch which Gozona held over her head was reflected a million times in the sinister, black water and hundreds of those evil green heads of the electric eels were thrust up.

"I hope we don't get stalled and drop in midstream," murmured Jack. "If we fall into the midst of the electric eels, it will be all up with us!"

The thought-power of Gozona did not fail, and

a little later the wagon descended gently on the far side of the underground river.

"We are now nearing the end," said the girl, as she got out and motioned to the others to follow. "It is almost morning."

The long night had rolled away, though such were the horrors through which the earth dwellers had passed that it seemed like a year. A little farther on they saw the welcome, rosy gleam of the rising sun and soon emerged on the edge of the blue lake, making their way through a thicket of small trees, bushes and rocks that effectually concealed that entrance to the tunnel.

"There is the *Blue Streak,*" said the girl, pointing through the morning haze that hung over the lake.

The fugitives had a glimpse of its shape on the island where they had landed. It was early morning. Not a person in that part of the strange city of Kar seemed moving. The blue water of the lake that gave life to many on Venus sparkled beautifully in the rosy beams of the rising sun.

"I have done what I can for you," said Gozona. "I have delivered you from your prison. The rest lies with you. I can go no farther. There is the ship that will carry you through space back to earth. It is still supplied with some of the kind of food you eat. If you can manage the machinery you may yet reach your home."

"We'll make the attempt!" declared Mark earnestly.

"It's too bad you can't come with us," said Jack, holding out his hand impulsively. "You've done a lot for us. I—I'll never forget you—Gozona!" He seemed much perturbed.

"Nor I," said Mark, and his voice was far from steady.

"You have been most kind to us, dear lady," added the old professor, and his voice was a bit husky.

"Farewell!" murmured the girl in blue. "Now go! The people will soon be stirring. Your escape may be discovered at any moment. Hurry!"

"How are we to get to the island?" asked Jack. "Will it be safe to swim or is there a thought wagon?"

"You could not swim in the blue lake—it would be sacrilege. Nor dare I go with you to pilot the thought carriage. But there is a boat, such as our lower class use—those who have not sufficient thought power. It will take you safely to the island."

She pointed to a dugout with oars. It was large enough to hold the three escaping earth dwellers.

"Good-by!" murmured Jack, again holding out his hand. "I—I wish you were coming with us!"

"So do I!" said Mark, and there was a little moisture in his eyes.

"My place is on Venus," the girl answered, and she turned her head away. "I have come to like you—like you—all—very much, and I regret what has happened here. But I can live only on Venus."

She covered her face with her slim, white hands, burst into tears and hurried away.

For a moment the three stood there, gazing after her. Then, with a long sigh, Jack said:

"Well, let's go!"

They got into the boat and rowed rapidly to the island. The sun was now above the rim of the lake. Day had come. A distant hum, as of beginning life, sounded from Kar.

"All aboard!" cried Jack, as he entered the *Blue Streak.*

"Home, James!" echoed Mark. "I guess we'll soon be leaving our troubles behind us," and he laughed, but in a queer way.

"Do not be too sure of that!" said the professor, as he followed his young companions. "We have a perilous journey of many million of miles ahead of us. But we shall hope for the best."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BLAST OF FIRE

FINDING themselves again in the familiar cabin where they had spent many anxious hours on the trip from the earth, the three space voyagers paused a moment to look about them. It seemed almost impossible that they had come safely through the perils of the underground passage, that they had escaped the transparent snakes and the fighting, giant spiders. But Gozona had guided them safely.

"We'd better step on it!" suggested Jack, after they had made a hurried inspection of the craft and found no one aboard but themselves. "It's only a question of time when they'll discover that we're gone and they'll be after us."

"Will they look for us here, do you think?" asked Mark.

"Sure!" declared Jack. "These Venusians have super-brains. They can think through a brick wall, and Pritexa will think, first of all, that we'd make for this ship. It's a wonder to me he didn't spot us in the underground caves."

"Gozona said he did not know of them," suggested the professor. "One can project one's brain only toward what one knows or has experienced, either consciously or subconsciously. Never having known anything about the secret passage, Pritexa is unable to visualize it and, in consequence, cannot project it into his brain."

"Well, sooner or later they'll spot us here," said Mark. "That boat we used may belong to some fisherman and he'll miss it. He'll raise a row and when they couple that with the fact that we have slipped out of the red jail they'll guess where we are."

"I don't doubt that," said Professor Hertz. "We must leave as soon as possible."

"Do you think we can really work this ship back to earth?" asked Mark.

"We've got to!" said Jack desperately.

"We will do our best!" said Gustavus Hertz, simply but fervently.

They had come away from their prison without any of their possessions save their automatics. But, fortunately, not all the food and other supplies they had brought with them from earth had been taken from the *Blue Streak* when she landed on the island in the lake. Consequently, a goodly quantity of their stores was on board. This was fortunate, for they might be longer than three days on the return trip and they had no chance

to gather food on Venus. They had learned that certain things common to the earth were also found on this strange planet, but they had no opportunity to get any.

"Seal the door!" cried the professor, after a hasty inspection had disclosed on what they could depend for the home trip. "I'm going to start the engine of gold."

"You won't be any too soon," said Mark, pointing across the blue water, now sparkling in the beams of the rising sun. "Look!"

On the mainland many persons could now be seen moving to and fro. They were the early risers among the Venusians, but whether Pritexa and his fellow plotter and guards were among them could not be told at that distance.

"They don't seem excited," was Jack's comment. "They seem to be going about their own affairs. I don't believe our absence has yet been discovered."

"That may be so," admitted the professor. "But it will not do to take chances. "We must hurry!"

For a moment the two young men looked from one of the ports of the *Blue Streak* toward the mainland where, near the shore of the lake, more and more of the populace seemed to be gathering. But this, the earth dwellers knew, was a common occurrence, since most of the inhabitants of Kar

depended for life on the blue water and had to get a fresh supply every day.

"Well, look your last on Venus, old man!" called Jack to his chum, as he swung shut the heavy, main door and began clamping the fastenings.

"Good-by to Venus and—Gozona!" Mark murmured. "She certainly helped us out of a tight corner."

"I wish she were going back with us!" exclaimed Jack Darrow, and his chum nodded in assent.

In the engine room they could hear the professor starting some machines and adjusting others preparatory to turning on the main pieces of apparatus.

"I'll need your help now, young gentlemen!" he called.

"Coming!" sang out Mark.

"I wonder if we'll have to put on gas masks when we leave Venus as we did when leaving the earth?" asked Jack.

"We didn't wear them on approaching this planet," said the professor, "because of the changed conditions. Consequently, I hardly believe we shall need to put them on now. But we will have them in readiness and can put them on if we begin to feel faint or smell any overpowering odors."

"It's going to be quite a change to get back to earth," remarked Mark.

"In more ways than one," said Jack.

"I mean in the quality of the air we'll have to breathe," went on his chum. "We have been used to the peppy atmosphere of Venus and it will come a bit hard to slow down to the kind of air we'll have to breathe at home."

It was true. Since they had lived on Venus they had felt extraordinarily vitalized by reason of the atmosphere, which contained an unusually high percentage of ozone. One seldom felt tired there even after working hard for twenty-four hours, or half a day according to the Venusians' computation of time. And Mark, Jack, and the professor had experienced little fatigue after being hustled from one city to another to be shown, like strange beasts, in the schools.

"We can easily adjust ourselves again to conditions on the earth," said the professor.

"If we ever get there," was Jack's rather dubious proviso.

The *Blue Streak* was now ready to start. As Gozona had told the escaping prisoners, the ship had been tuned up for another long voyage into space by some of the Venusian scientists. Thus, luckily, the craft was in excellent shape for the purpose to which it was now going to be put.

"Are we all ready?" asked the professor, glanc-

ing from the engine of gold, near which he stood, to his young assistants.

"All ready here!" said Mark.

"All ready here," echoed Jack.

"Then away we go!" exclaimed the German.

There was a whir of wheels, a grinding of gears, a clicking of springs, and a quiver seemed to run through the *Blue Streak*. It was as if she were trying to tear herself loose from the island.

"Here we go!" yelled Jack. "They'll never stop us now!"

Hardly had he spoken than the whole engine room seemed to be a mass of blue fire which knocked the three down like a blasting wind. There was a deafening explosion and the professor, Mark, and Jack fell to the metal floor of the control room, stricken by some awful power.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PURPLE DUST

THAT explosion aboard the *Blue Streak* had aroused not only the early risers of Kar, but some late sleepers.

Those gathered on the shore of the blue lake, were of course soon made aware of the location of the blast. Even before this, however, some of the inhabitants had become suspicious at seeing the three forms of the earth dwellers moving about and had already sent word to the authorities.

In his quarters near the red prison of his late captives, Pritexa heard the distant explosion as he was rising for what he thought would be a momentous day. How momentous it was to be, he little dreamed.

On this day he was to have taken his captives before the Venusian Queen. News of the presence on Venus of the queer earth dwellers had reached the monarch, and she had expressed a wish to see them. Such a wish was a command, and Pritexa was going to carry it out.

As the echoes of the explosion reached his ears, Pritexa leaped out of bed and called to one of his men:

"What was that?"

"A noise on the island in the blue lake," was the answer. "On the island where the *Space Ship* rests," for such was the Venusian name of the *Blue Streak*.

Suspicion at once entered the mind of Pritexa. He quickly coupled the explosion with his captives and cried out:

"Ho, red guards! See to the prisoners!"

It needed but a few minutes to establish the fact that Mark, Jack and the professor had vanished.

"They have outwitted me!" cried Pritexa, in a rage. "They are escaping! They have tried to blow up the *Space Ship!*"

A moment later a report came from observers on the shore of the blue lake.

"The *Space Ship* is soaring!" they cried. "See! It leaves Venus!"

"There go my earth prisoners!" yelled Pritexa, in a wilder rage. "Stop them! Start our attraction engines! Pull the *Space Ship* back! Fire on it! Destroy it! Those prisoners will take our secrets to earth! They must die!"

At once the whole vicinity of Kar, in the neighborhood of the island and the blue lake, was in

the wildest commotion. Pritexa was a man of authority and his orders were instantly put into execution.

On Venus there were powerful machines for repelling rival aircraft and others for attracting such ships to the planet with sufficient force to wreck them. Some of these were quickly put into operation as the *Space Ship,* or *Blue Streak,* to use the name the earth-born had given the projectile, soared toward the zenith.

"Fire on it!" cried Pritexa as, hastily dressing, he hurried to the shore of the lake. "Fire before it is too late!"

At his command powerful electric guns, some shooting explosive projectiles and others sending out strong currents of rays, were aimed at the soaring craft.

But whatever had happened aboard the *Blue Streak* did not seem to have destroyed its power to fly, for it was now soaring away from Venus at terrific speed.

"Bring it back! Bring it back!" raged Pritexa, rushing about in his madness.

"It is beyond the power of our attractive engines now, sir," said one of the red guards.

"Then destroy it by fire!" came the order. "Those men must not get back to earth with our secrets! Fire!"

Another salvo was sent after the *Blue Streak.*

"Touched! Touched!" exulted Pritexa. "A good hit!"

With the booming of the largest air guns in that part of Venus, the *Blue Streak* swerved and changed its direction.

"It is falling! It is out of control! It is falling!" yelled Pritexa, in delight. "They will all be killed!"

"Oh!" exclaimed a voice at his side.

He turned to behold Gozona.

"Ah, it is you," he said, and he seemed to have no suspicion of what she had done. "They tried to escape, but they shall not!"

He turned to watch again the distant craft, which was now whirling dizzily about.

"It will smash!" he exulted madly. "They will all die!"

Gozona covered her eyes with her hand and turned away, while over the face of the captain of the *Blue Streak* fierce emotion played and he smiled cruelly.

"Quick!" cried Pritexa to some of his red guards. "Get one of the large thought carriages! We must go to the place where the ship falls. I can at least have the bodies of my prisoners!"

Once more he turned his eyes toward the dizzily whirling craft, and as his man hastened to do his bidding some clouds shut off the view of the *Blue Streak*.

"But I shall have them! They may be dead, but I shall have them!" exulted Pritexa. "It will be as great a sacrifice as if I had cast them into the burning mountain! They shall not escape me!"

Meanwhile, within the *Blue Streak,* which was being whirled through space at such a terrific speed, there was silence following that terrible blast of fire. The bodies of the three occupants lay on the floor of the engine room, not the flicker of an eyelash betraying that any life was within them.

On and on through space the projectile rushed. From the openings in the base there issued the powerful rocketlike streams of gases, the action of which sent the *Blue Streak* onward and onward.

Jack was the first to open his eyes. How long he had been unconscious he did not know. He was too weak to glance at the chronometer near the whirring engine of gold.

For a little while he did not care whether he lived or died. The energy that had carried him through the den of glass snakes and the webs of the horned spiders seemed all to have departed.

But, gradually, strength and understanding came back to him. He moved his head and saw Mark lying beside him. At the same moment Mark opened his eyes and gazed listlessly about.

"What—what happened?" he murmured in a faint voice.

"Guess we—sort of—blew up!" mumbled Jack.

Mark thought this over—his brain seemed benumbed—and then he said:

"But we are moving! We're flying along!"

"Yes, I guess—I guess we are," Jack admitted. It did not make much difference to him.

"Where's the professor?" asked Mark, after a moment's pause.

Jack turned his head a bit more and saw the body of Professor Hertz on the floor near the engine of gold. There was something odd about it. Jack forced himself to rise and walk toward it. He saw the professor lying with closed eyes. He had taken off his coat before starting the engine and, because of the heat, had removed his collar and opened his shirt at the neck. Part of his body was visible and now, over his face, neck, and chest Jack observed a coating of purple dust.

Had some strange death claimed the scientist?

CHAPTER XXX

BACK TO EARTH

STUNNED by the awful thought that they might have to travel through limitless space, sealed in the shell of the *Blue Streak* with the dead body of Gustavus Hertz—for without his help they could not hope to navigate the craft—Mark Sampson and Jack Darrow staggered to the side of the silent professor and looked down on him. What was that queer purple dust that covered him? What had caused the fire and explosion that had sent them into unconsciousness, though it did not appear to have seriously damaged the interior of the craft?

These were questions that flashed through their benumbed minds.

The eyelids of the scientist quivered and moved. A wave of hope surged through the hearts of the young men. Then the professor looked at them, not understandingly at first, but gradually with dawning consciousness.

"Is it morning?" he asked, and smiled.

"Then you're not dead!" cried Jack.

"Far from it, though I feel peculiar," said the scientist, with another smile. "The last I remember is coming aboard the ship and starting the engine. Then I seem to have fallen asleep."

"I guess you were knocked out, and by this purple dust," said Mark.

The professor rose to a sitting position, brushed away some of the purple flakes, and then laughed aloud.

"I thought for a moment that I was tattooed," he chuckled, as he saw the coloring matter on his chest. "But I see what this is. It is some of the power powder used in the engine of gold. And, unless I am mistaken, I think a small reservoir of it must have exploded. Yes, look!" He pointed to a corner of the engine room, and there lay the fragments of what had been a thin metal container of the purple power powder. It had blown up, fortunately with no worse results than to stun, for a time, the three travelers.

"I certainly thought it was the end of the world!" murmured Jack.

"Speaking of the world—and I mean our own earth," came from Mark, "do you think we have enough power powder left to make the distance?"

"That will have to be seen to," said the professor, getting up. He and the others were rapidly recovering from the effects of the explosion which were more of a chemical than a

really blasting nature. "I will save this," he added, shaking the purple grains off his body into a heap on the floor and carefully gathering them up. "We may need every atom of it. Now let us see how far we are on our journey toward home."

He rose to consult the instruments as Jack murmured:

"We're mighty lucky to have gotten away."

"That's right!" chimed in Mark.

"But we did not get away from Venus without an effort having been made to hold us or bring us back," said the professor in startled tones as he looked at some of the indicators.

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"Look!" The scientist pointed to a chart on which was traced a wavy, red line. "If we had held a true course that line would have been straight," said Professor Hertz. "After we started, and the explosion knocked us senseless, our escape from Kar must have been discovered. Then they used some kind of magnetic power to try to get us back, and it may have been that they fired at us."

"Like the anti-aircraft guns on the earth!" exclaimed Jack.

"Exactly," agreed the professor. "Something that the Venusians did swerved us off our course and sent us whirling dizzily about. The auto-

matic record of our progress shows that. But we are now on a straight line for our earth."

"And I hope we get there!" exclaimed Mark.

"I wonder what happened on Venus after we left?" pondered Jack.

They could only guess, but the instruments consulted by the professor gave a basis for their conjectures, though of course the travelers had no means of knowing that it was Pritexa's rage that had nearly sent them into oblivion. The *Blue Streak* had been hit by a missile and had begun to fall, but the terrific power of the engine of gold, working automatically once it was started, had pulled the craft back on the course that had been set and controlled by the gyroscope compass.

To detail all the circumstances of the journey back to earth would, in a measure, only duplicate the story of the trip to Venus. Sufficient to say that by dint of constant watch and hard work the travelers managed to keep all the machines going at top speed and the *Blue Streak* was held on her course.

The trip was not without dangers. Once they were menaced by a swiftly sailing comet, but by using the tactics employed on the journey up they got around it. Again the craft was hit by a small meteor which, however, did no material damage.

They hoped to escape the yellow snow, and almost managed it, going only through an edge

of a storm of its sinister, ochrelike flakes. But the masks saved them.

After about four days, one afternoon the professor, having consulted his charts and having made some calculations, announced:

"We shall reach the earth at ten o'clock tonight!"

"Good!" cried Mark.

"I hope we hit it gently, so we don't crack up the way the Venusian parties did," remarked Jack.

"We shall take care," said the German-born scientist.

How anxiously the youths watched the hours pass! It grew dark, and then they knew they were in the shadow of the earth as they had been, before, in the shadow of Venus.

"I hope we land somewhere near home," said Jack, as the hands of the clock neared the hour of ten. "I sure will be glad to get on a clean shirt!" They had no change of clothes since escaping from the red jail.

"I think we shall come very near the place from which we left," Professor Hertz predicted.

They did. Their own beloved earth soon loomed before them. The negative gravity machines were set going, all propelling power having already been shut off, for the attraction of the earth was now pulling the *Blue Streak* toward it. As a precaution, when first entering the atmos-

phere of the earth, the gas masks were worn, as they had been on the first trip. But they were removed when passing through the denser strata.

There was a sudden jolt.

"We've landed!" cried Jack.

"Open the door!" shouted Mark.

The voyagers stepped out of their craft and looked around them. There was a moon, as when they had landed on Venus, but not so bright. By its silvery sheen they saw where they were.

"Not a quarter of a mile from our own shops!" cried Jack. "If that isn't navigating the boundless solar space, I'd like to know what it is!"

"Hurrah! We're at home!" cried Mark.

And home they were, after such a series of astounding adventures as seldom fall to the lot of man. The *Blue Streak* had landed gently in a secluded place not far from Professor Henderson's shops, and a little later Jack, Mark and Professor Hertz were telling him and Washington White their wonderful experiences as captives of a strange people. The old colored man was visibly impressed.

"But Ah jes' cain't believe dat yo' all hab been to Wemus an' back! No, sah, Ah jes' cain't!" he declared.

"Didn't we bring back the *Blue Streak?*" asked Mark. "Go out and take a look in the morning, Wash!"

"Dat's so—yo' all did brung back de ship. Den yo' mus' hab been on Wemus. Did all de ladies hab der arms bruk off, laik dat statue I seen in de museum?" he asked.

"He means the Venus of Milo," chuckled Jack. "No, we didn't see any armless ladies."

"Den yo' wasn't on Wemus!" declared Washington, with conviction. "Yo' all cain't fool me! If de ladies wasn't wifout arms, yo' all wasn't on Wemus!" and nothing could ever convince Washington to the contrary.

But the scientific and newspaper worlds came to know this for a fact. For not only was the *Blue Streak* evidence, but there were the learned papers and books written by Professor Hertz.

"In many ways it was the most wonderful trip we ever made," said Mark to Jack one day about a week later.

"Yes, it was," and Jack sighed. Then he and his chum looked at each other. Each knew of what the other was thinking. There was no need to mention the name of the beautiful Gozona.

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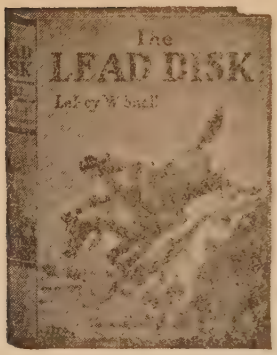

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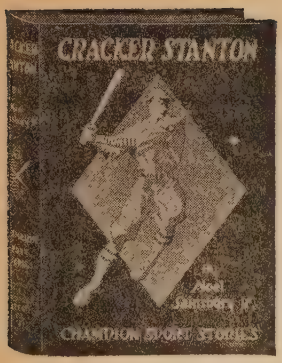

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